READING SCRIPTURE IN THE WAKE OF CHRIST:
THE CHURCH AS A HERMENEUTICAL SPACE

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Abstract

In this dissertation I offer a constructive account of the church’s role in the process of reading and understanding Scripture. This task has become especially relevant due to the recent popularity of “ecclesial hermeneutics.” In response to intellectual trends that sought, explicitly or implicitly, to remove Scripture from the sphere church and relocate it within a supposedly more hermeneutically salubrious environment (e.g., the academy), many ecclesial readers have endeavored to return Scripture to its proper home. As Bonhoeffer claimed in 1933, presaging contemporary trends, Scripture is “the book of the church” and must be “interpreted as such.” Drawing from various theological and philosophical developments that emerged during the latter half of the 20th century, Christian interpreters have felt emboldened to follow Bonhoeffer’s lead, not only tolerating but prioritizing and accentuating the particularity of their ecclesial vantage point and the unique form of thinking constituted by its language, traditions, and practices.

This dissertation enters the debate at just this point. Ecclesiology has obviously carried great weight in recent conversations about biblical interpretation, but rarely has ecclesiology itself become a direct object of theological focus within them. Ecclesial hermeneutics has remained ecclesially ambiguous. In this dissertation, therefore, I ask an ecclesiological question as a means of answering a hermeneutical one. I set out deliberately to consider what it means to read in, as, and for the church. What “church” is presupposed in theological interpretation? What practices come embedded within it? And how does this shape the ends of faithful interpretation? In short, how, precisely, does the church function as a hermeneutical space?
Beyond merely describing what others have offered, I put forward a constructive vision. I propose to understand the church as a confluence of four dynamics, each of which is marked by a particular relationship. Together, these four dynamics constitute the church as a hermeneutical space. In short, the church exists (1) in relationship to the risen Christ, (2) in relationship to its own historical-institutional past, (3) in relationship to a particular place and the concrete bodies gathered there, and (4) in relationship to the world. Each of this dissertation’s four parts focuses on one of these dimensions, showing how its particular aspects carry hermeneutical significance. Each part consists of two chapters. In these two chapters I first focus on the hermeneutical implications of a given dimension and then listen to Bonhoeffer as a means of complexifying and deepening this analysis. It thus becomes evident that the coherence of my project owes much to Bonhoeffer, whose voice serves as the keynote that allows me to draw diverse others into conversation.

Listening to Bonhoeffer, I hope to show that these four dimensions cohere to shape the church as one hermeneutical space. This coherence is important, for I argue that recent proposals within ecclesial hermeneutics have accentuated particular dimensions of the church, but have failed to do so comprehensively. In other words, explicitly ecclesial hermeneutics commonly display onesided tendencies by relying on a truncated account of the church in which only one dimension of ecclesiology carries hermeneutical significance. Beyond being theoretically deficient, this tendency exerts a distortive effect at the level of practice. What is needed, then, is a more complex ecclesiological imagination, the fruit of which will be a more complete and theologically robust account of what it means to read in, as, and for the church.

While this dissertation’s animating concerns are deeply theological, they are altogether practical. A properly theological account of hermeneutical faithfulness is impossible without
attention to the actual activities involved in the reading process. Bonhoeffer understood this well, and he proves himself to be a pastoral theologian by the facility with which he moves from the theoretical to the practical realm. Following Bonhoeffer’s example, I hope to make a constructive claim not only about a theology of Scripture or scriptural hermeneutics but about the practices and habits that sustain faithful reading.

While my heavily Christological focus (Part One) may seem to perpetuate the same onesidedness I seek to correct, I hope to show that when properly construed, the Christological dimension of the church is capacious enough to include the others. By jointly imagining the church’s historical-institutional past (Part Two), life together (Part Three), and missionary relationship to the world (Part Four) in terms of Jesus’ ongoing presence and particularity, we will find the resources necessary to imagine the ecclesiology that serves as a space for faithful reading. What ultimately emerges from this account of Christ and the fourfold account of the church that corresponds to him is a hermeneutic of discipleship, a way of thinking vis-à-vis Scripture that takes place in the wake of Christ’s ongoing action and ultimately aims at participation in it.
For Lauren and Theo
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Biography
Introduction

The Re-Emergence of Ecclesial Hermeneutics

In this dissertation I offer a constructive account of the church’s role in the process of reading and understanding Scripture. I follow Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s lead toward this end. At the beginning of *Creation and Fall*, the published version of his Berlin lectures on Genesis delivered in the winter semester of 1932-33, the twenty-six-year-old Bonhoeffer presciently anticipates contemporary trends in biblical interpretation: “Theological exposition takes the Bible as the book of the church,” he boldly claims, “and interprets it as such.”¹ For most of church history, Bonhoeffer’s claim would have been tautological. What else would Scripture be for? Who else would read it? And why? But in an academic context where the modern-critical agenda held sway, determining not only the methods but also the ends of biblical interpretation, Bonhoeffer shamelessly prefaced his interpretive work with this traditional claim. Whereas many of his contemporaries focused their interpretive efforts on making Scripture intelligible in its original historical or religious context, Bonhoeffer embarked on a qualitatively different task: to hear Scripture as the word of God. No wonder most systematic theologians of the time ignored his work, while most biblical scholars scorned his seemingly un-critical, Barthian method.² Yet based on his students’ sympathetic response, Bonhoeffer’s newfound interpretive agenda blew like a fresh breeze

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through the Berlin lecture halls. The Bible not only spoke back then, he unequivocally proclaimed—it continues to speak today. And hearing this word, he goes on to suggest, is a distinctly ecclesial enterprise, a practice of the church.

Unpacking precisely how and why this is the case constitutes my fundamental goal in this project. Though Bonhoeffer himself is rarely acknowledged as a forebear of the contemporary turn toward “theological interpretation” and “ecclesial hermeneutics,” his remarks foreshadow its defining contours. This is particularly true to the extent that the same concerns that instigated Bonhoeffer’s distrust of modern scriptural hermeneutics and his ensuing ecclesial turn continue to motivate theological interpreters today.

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3 Ibid., 1.

4 These terms operate broadly in contemporary discussions and therefore lack precise definitions. As I use them, they are nearly synonymous and can be used interchangeably, with the possible exception that “ecclesial hermeneutics” refers to a more general level of understanding, whereas “theological interpretation” focuses specifically on the task of understanding of Scripture within the church. As I hope to show, however, this difference carries less practical significance than some imagine. For an introduction to “theological interpretation,” see Stephen E. Fowl, Theological Interpretation of Scripture (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009); Daniel J. Treier, Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); J. Todd Billings The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); and Kevin Vanhoozer, “Introduction,” in the Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, N.T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 19-26. The original theory underlying theological interpretation began to emerge in the 1990s; see Francis Watson, Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994) and Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997); Stephen Fowl, Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998); and Kevin Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998). The emergence of theological interpretation has inspired a number of efforts to put it into practice; see, as notable examples, the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, ed. R. R. Reno (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos), and Journal of Theological Interpretation.

The intellectual trends that originally provoked Scripture’s migration from ecclesial to academic space have been well attested, and we need not rehash them here. For my larger purposes in this project, the basic point to note can be stated directly: though the emergence of the modern-critical paradigm was funded by the quest to secure reliable knowledge, implicit ecclesiological assumptions nevertheless come embedded within it. Spinoza laid the groundwork on which this paradigm would be built when he famously begins his *Theologico-Political Treatise* by purifying his interpretive method of ecclesial influences: “I deliberately resolved to examine Scripture afresh, conscientiously and freely, and to admit nothing as its teaching which I did not most clearly derive from it.” When Kant proposes “no imperative ‘Believe!’ but only a free *credo,*” the trajectory of

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6 See especially Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974). Also note Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 17-62. Of course, scriptural texts were not literally taken out of the church. Rather, the basic assumption was that in order for one to read Scripture well within the church one must first read without the church. For a helpful recent articulation of this mindset, and one that transcends common stereotypes, see John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

7 These methodological issues, of course, are bound up with more fundamental commitments about the nature of history and historical existence. Whereas in a pre-modern world one could trust metaphysical paths to lead one to certainty, the fundamentally non-metaphysical nature of modern epistemology requires another means of ascertaining knowledge. Hence, the importance of method and technique.

8 Baruch Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 2nd ed., trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hacket, 1998), 5. This is not to suggest that Spinoza himself bears responsibility for the emergence of the critical hermeneutical paradigm, but merely that he captures key features of its animating ethos. On Spinoza’s hermeneutic, see Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 108-118. It is, of course, impossible to label any one person as the founder of biblical criticism. Regarding various progenitors of the movement, see Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 118-130.

9 Immanuel Kant, “The Conflict of the Faculties” in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge, 1996), 249. As with most movements, modern hermeneutics emerges in different iterations. Schleiermacher, for example, famously suggests that the goal of hermeneutics is to understand an author
modern biblical hermeneutics is set. The key presupposition underlying its emergence, as Jon Levenson suggests, is that scholars “eliminate or minimize their communal loyalties, [or] see them as legitimately operative only within associations that are private, nonscholarly, and altogether voluntary.”¹⁰ The implicit assumption, then, is that the church is hermeneutically distortive. To read well, one must read in a realm beyond the reach of its influence.

Of course, this was not meant to prohibit Scripture from serving the church’s particular ends. It did, however, require that in order for an interpretation to reach these ends it must first pass through a general process. The church’s reading must become an instance of a more universal phenomenon of reading—Scripture must be read “like any other book.”¹¹ As Gabler paradigmatically depicts in his famous distinction between “biblical” and “dogmatic” theology, a reconstructive and descriptive task—the tools and criteria for which, he believed, are universal and scientific in nature—must precede the church’s particular and normative use.¹² Within this hermeneutical paradigm, Scripture can indeed be read for the church, but it should not be read in and

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as the church. The church ceases to have a hermeneutical function. To borrow Ricoeur’s terminology, interpretation was thereby “deregionalized”—a general hermeneutic replaced a mode of reading suited to a particular text or domain.\textsuperscript{13} Diagnosing the modern situation, Ricoeur notes, “A general hermeneutic therefore requires that the interpreter rise above the particular applications and discern the operations which are common to [different texts and domains]. In order to do that, however, it is necessary to rise above, not only the particularity of texts, but also the particularity of the rules and recipes into which the art of understanding is dispersed.”\textsuperscript{14} Understanding, in other words, had ceased to be an ecclesial art, and the church no longer functioned as a distinct hermeneutical space. Rather than producing its own hermeneutical fruit, the church must import readings from elsewhere.

Just how these realms differ—and to what extent they might overlap—remains an open question in recent debates within theological interpretation. My account of the relationship between church and academy will become clearer as this project unfolds. In my estimate, K. P. Donfried is right when he insists that the danger “is not with the tools employed by historical biblical critics…but the domain of meaning into which the results of such critical study are placed.”\textsuperscript{15} As he goes on to argue, the real issue is one of hermeneutical context. On this reading, the hermeneutical

\textsuperscript{13} Paul Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics,” in Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences (Cambridge, 1981), 43. “The real movement of deregionalisation begins with the attempt to extract a general problem from the activity of interpretation which is each time engaged in different texts” (45).

\textsuperscript{14} Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics,” 45.

issue in question is not primarily a matter of how scholars read the Bible but of the assumptions that undergird and motivate the practice—it is less a matter of technique than of posture. As much as this distinction is appropriate, we can perhaps avoid treating the academy with as much derision as have some recent proponents of theological interpretation. Yet regardless of how precisely we navigate this particular issue, the point to note for now is that implicit within both the emergence of modern criticism and contemporary debates between academic and ecclesial interpreters is the assumption that more is going on in the act of interpretation than the mere deployment of tools or methods. Interpretive context exerts consequence. For good or ill, the church functions as a hermeneutical space.

This means that in one way or another ecclesiology is a hermeneutically significant doctrinal locus. Karl Barth was one of the first to make this connection. If the lust for objectivity and certainty funded, at least in part, the move away from ecclesial space, Barth paved the way back to the church by reimagining what “objectivity” means vis-à-vis a living God. In explicit rejection of the epistemological presuppositions governing the modern critical enterprise, Barth embraced a form of objectivity controlled by the subject-matter itself. With this discovery, he found himself in a radically new hermeneutical situation. He, the reader, was one addressed. In this situation, Barth

16 Scholars commonly see Barth as a forebear of theological interpretation (e.g., Treier, Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture). Other genealogies, however, grant him little significance (e.g., Fowl, Theological Interpretation of Scripture).

17 The definitive study of Barth’s early hermeneutic is Richard E. Burnett, Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

felt free to be more objective than modern hermeneutics would allow, more critical than the critics. Given the nature of Scripture’s subject-matter, this interpretive posture constitutes true hermeneutical Sachlichkeit. Constrained by a critical worldview, one is tempted to read the Bible unbiblically, Barth suggests. To read as one un-addressed, in the mythically neutral domain of historicist study, is to risk reading something other than the Christian canon and hearing something other than God’s voice. Though the specifically ecclesiological dimensions of Barth’s earliest theology are not always clear, he soon learned to situate theological exegesis within the sphere of the church. The address that constitutes the interpretive situation and establishes true interpretive objectivity is the address that gives being and shape to the church itself. God’s voice, faithful reading, and ecclesial existence are inseparably bound.

While Barth was pioneering a hermeneutical return to the church with the help of revolutionary theological resources, another set of resources was emerging from the world of philosophy. In response to what David Tracy calls “the Enlightenment belief in a purely autonomous consciousness,” twentieth century philosophical hermeneutics has forcefully reasserted the situatedness, historicity, and community-dependent nature of human thought. Here Heidegger and Gadamer led the way; our mode of being in the world carries interpretive

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20 See Barth’s explanation of his decision to change the modifier of “Dogmatics” from “Christian” to “Church”: “Materially, I have also tried to show that from the very outset dogmatics is not a free science. It is bound to the sphere of the Church, where alone it is possible and meaningful” (*Church Dogmatics* I/1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 2nd ed., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), xiii.


significance, and preunderstanding is not the enemy of hermeneutics but its very possibility. Wittgenstein and others have taught that the historicity and contingency of language is not a tainted accretion behind which truth lies hidden but the very vehicle of meaning in its truest form. Bourdieu pointed to modes of understanding embedded within practice, and philosophers like MacIntyre taught that tradition is not only inherent but necessary to rationality. Indeed, all paradigms of thought are historically contingent (Kuhn) and all knowledge has a subjective pole (Polanyi). With regard to texts per se, Ricoeur follows this train of thought when he contends that “the text exists, in the final analysis, thanks to the community, for the use of the community, with a view to giving shape to the community.” With regard to the specific act of interpreting texts, many have come to suggest that textually-mediated “meaning” is not as stable or accessible as was once thought. Stanley Fish famously suggests, for example, that rather than an objective property carried within the text and unearthed by proper methods, meaning is itself the product of the reading strategy brought to bear upon it.

With the help of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, these insights acquired distinctly theological shape and gained wide influence within Anglophone theology. Frei’s *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* has become a standard genealogy of the demise—and potential rebirth—of a distinctly Christian mode of scriptural interpretation. Though Frei’s own constructive solution to modernity’s hermeneutical dilemma evolves over time, it is clear that for him the worshipping community is

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24 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
hermeneutically central. His comments on the text’s “literal sense” convey the community-dependent nature of interpretation: “The literal meaning of the text is precisely that meaning which finds the greatest degree of agreement in the use of the text in the religious community. If there is agreement in that use, then take that to be the literal sense.”

Lindbeck, Frei’s Yale colleague, adds ecclesiological thickness to this emerging hermeneutical vision. Drawing from a wide array of philosophical, sociological, and anthropological resources, he argues for a “cultural-linguistic” account of rationality internal to the logic and grammar of a particular community. This suggests, among other things, that the church’s particular resources, far from being distortive, are hermeneutically necessary.

In recent decades, Barth and Bonhoeffer’s trailblazing route back to the church has become a well-worn path. Drawing from these larger trends, Christian interpreters have felt emboldened not only to tolerate but to prioritize and accentuate the particularity of their ecclesial vantage point and the unique form of thinking constituted by its language, traditions, and practices. Echoing Bonhoeffer’s paradigmatic claim, Stephen Fowl captures the heart of the movement when he writes,


27 While broader philosophical movements have undoubtedly influenced contemporary theological trends, not all proponents of ecclesial hermeneutics equally appreciate the insights of philosophy. For example, Stephen Fowl no longer thinks that a general theory of textual meaning derived from philosophical hermeneutics is crucial to interpreting Scripture theologically. See his “Further Thoughts on Theological Interpretation,” in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, ed. A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Francis Watson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 125-6. This claim slightly modifies his earlier argument in *Engaging Scripture*, which grants more significance to philosophical resources.
“Reading Scripture theologically is first and foremost a practice of the church. It does not depend on
the support of academics for its survival.”\(^{28}\) Elsewhere he notes,

By defining a theological interpretation of scripture as a reading aimed at shaping and being
shaped by a community’s faith and practice, I have at the same time indicated a location
where such a reading will be most at home. That is, theological interpretation of scripture
will take place primarily within the context of the church and synagogue, those communities
that seek to order their common life in accord with their interpretation of scripture.\(^{29}\)

He goes on to suggest that the nature of this space determines the criteria and process for faithful
reading: “This setting provides both the direction for theological interpretation and the standards
against which such readings can be judged.”\(^ {30} \)

The implications of this assertion are wide ranging. R. R. Reno points to its distinctly
doctrinal implications, suggesting that the church’s teachings are not distortive but clarifying.\(^ {31}\) For
the church to read well, it must read within the framework of the rule of faith.\(^ {32}\) If the church spans
the so-called hermeneutical gap between the “then” of the text and the “now” of reading, as Robert
Jenson affirms, then the requisite tools for understanding the text are not primarily historical—as if
today’s reader is left stranded at a historical distance from authentic meaning—but ecclesial. Thus,

\(^{28}\) Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 23.


\(^{30}\) Ibid.


along with doctrine, liturgical practice gains hermeneutical significance. James Fodor asserts, for instance, that “worship is Scripture’s home, its native soil, its most congenial habitat…it is in the liturgy…that Christians are schooled and exercised in the scriptural logic of their faith.” If this is the case, then the proper reader is not the autonomous academic but the worshipping community. Likewise, distinctly theological virtues and habits formed through ecclesial practices are prerequisites for interpretation, and as Richard Hays claims, faith—not neutrality or objectivity—stands as “the epistemological precondition for reading Scripture well.” Hays goes on to suggest that this faith is “a skill for which we are trained by the Christian tradition.” While not all would agree with the classical claim, exemplified in St. Hilary of Poitiers’ bold assertion that “those who are situated outside the church are not able to acquire any understanding of the divine discourse,” it is undeniably the case that many readers of Scripture today have recovered the Augustinian priority of the church as a hermeneutical presupposition. Scripture, we have learned to claim, has a distinct, *Sitz im Leben*, a natural home. Not only can we read Scripture for the church’s unique ends, one


37 Ibid., 14.


39 “For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church” (Augustine, *Against the Epistle of the Manichaeus Called Fundamental*, chap. 5).
can—and indeed must—read Scripture in and as the church in order to reach these ends. The church has again become a hermeneutical space.

The “Church” in Theological Interpretation

This dissertation enters the debate at just this point. Ecclesiology has obviously carried great weight in recent conversations about biblical interpretation, but rarely has ecclesiology itself become a direct object of theological focus within them. Ecclesial hermeneutics has remained ecclesially ambiguous. In this dissertation, therefore, I ask an ecclesiological question as a means of answering a hermeneutical one. I set out deliberately to consider what it means to read in, as, and for the church. What “church” is presupposed in theological interpretations? What practices come embedded within it? And how does this shape the ends of faithful interpretation? In short, how, precisely, does the church function as a hermeneutical space?

One the one hand, this entails a descriptive claim: how has ecclesiology functioned within recent ecclesial hermeneutics? In pursuing this question, it will become evident that different accounts of the church lead to different accounts of interpretive faithfulness and the practices that sustain it. It will also become evident that while much is to be gleaned from recent proposals, they are not beyond criticism. By drawing attention to their underlying ecclesiological presuppositions, I hope to interrogate recent proposals. The fruit of this is a constructive proposal: how ought the church function hermeneutically? In answering this question, I aim in this project to map a vision of the church as a hermeneutical space.
As a means of laying the groundwork for my constructive proposal, it will be useful here to gesture toward working definitions of key terms. What do I mean by “hermeneutics”? By “space”? And what kind of “church” can incorporate them?

“Hermeneutics” is a notoriously ambiguous word with no unifying definition. As Simone Sinn helpfully notes, we have “no common reference point for the many different disciplines that deal with hermeneutical issues,” and as a result “the hermeneutical field is very complex and there is no general theory to hermeneutics as a whole.” As a means of untangling the diversity of the subject, Sinn helpfully highlights three basic strands: hermeneutics as (1) the process of interpretation, (2) the phenomenon of understanding, and (3) the nature of human existence. The first is a methodological question, and it deals with the principles of interpreting texts (written or otherwise). The second is an epistemological question, and it deals with the process of encountering “meaning” in a text. The third is an ontological question, and it deals with the significance of understanding for human nature itself.

In this project, I am ostensibly concerned with the act of reading Christian Scripture (hermeneutics as the process of interpretation). But by moving this act within the life of the church I am muddying the waters. As Christians, we seek to interpret a text as a means of knowing the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ (hermeneutics as an epistemological question), which is bound up with

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42 Ibid., 576.
patterns of life in the world and modes of self-understanding vis-à-vis the risen Lord (hermeneutics as an ontological question). Whereas contemporary discussions about “theological interpretation” tend to exist within the domain of hermeneutics in the first sense, it will become clear as this project unfolds that I believe the three cannot be neatly teased apart. Following Bonhoeffer, I claim that reading Scripture in relationship to the risen Christ forces upon us a distinction between, on the one hand, understanding the text’s basic linguistic sense and, on the other, “hearing it correctly” as an existentially demanding word from Christ.\(^{43}\) It is possible, Bonhoeffer implies, to have one without the other, to offer good readings (hermeneutics in the first sense) that nevertheless fail to conform to Christ’s ongoing existence and that are therefore hermeneutically deficient. In such a case, Bonhoeffer writes, “The words are correct, but they have no weight.”\(^{44}\)

By calling to mind this distinction I am not intending to invoke the traditional contrast between what a text meant back then and what it means for us today.\(^{45}\) Nor is this a simple recitation of the argument that texts do not carry meaning apart from the act of reading and interpretation. In this dissertation I embark on a more properly theological project of rethinking what it means for a text to “mean” in light of Christ’s work of calling and shaping his community and what implications this has for the process of pursuing this meaning through the act of reading.


At the outset, my notion of “space” might seem equally ambiguous. In concurrence with the recent defection from modern theories of neutrality and impartiality, my most basic intention with the word is to suggest that the reader exists somewhere. Consequently, if we read within ecclesial space, we must question the necessity of readerly indeterminacy, a common assumption undergirding the modern hermeneutical enterprise. Here I take cues from Charles Taylor’s account of “moral space.” In response to the “naturalist reduction” that isolates the individual knower from her environment, Taylor argues for the legitimacy of frameworks that provide the beliefs, presuppositions, and values that make judgments possible. Framed in this way, ecclesial space functions as the qualitative realm that orients one within the world, provides a distinct identity, and thereby shapes a particular mode of knowing. John Webster has something like this in mind when he suggests that Christians read Scripture within a distinct domain. Taking his cues from Barth, Webster proposes that this domain derives its shape from God’s action. The church is a space, then, to the extent that it is a community addressed by God, a community that reads within the field of


48 Taylor, Sources of the Self, 25.

49 Bonhoeffer speaks of “the sphere of the church” and refers to it as a “clearly indicated” place precisely because God has spoken to the church in Christ. See, e.g., Berlin: 1932-1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 12, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Douglas W. Stott, Isabel Best, and David Higgins (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 303-304 (hereafter DBWE 12). The very nature of theological scholarship as a Christian practice therefore takes on distinct features. Bonhoeffer suggests, for instance, that we can ask about God only after God has spoken to us, which means that “the christological question can only be asked, as a scholarly question, within the sphere of the church” (303).

God’s activity. To say that this space entails moral and theological dimensions does not diminish the importance of its concrete physicality. The church is also spatial in the most literal sense—a concrete place where bodies, practices, and structures shape and sustain the process of coming to understand. How these dimensions of space give particular shape to the hermeneutical process is a task I undertake in the following chapters.

So what do I mean by “church”? The rest of this project stands as my answer to this question. I pursue the hermeneutical question by means of the ecclesiological because, as I demonstrate in subsequent chapters, what we mean by “church” determines what we mean by hermeneutical faithfulness more generally and interpretive faithfulness more specifically.

While “church” may seem more straightforward than both “hermeneutics” and “space,” things are not always so clear. Stephen Fowl is one of the few to note that a genuinely ecclesial hermeneutic must navigate the vagueness and imprecision of ecclesiology. Markus Bockmuehl similarly suggests that when conversations about theological interpretation do turn direct attention to the church, the term “can remain notably abstract and detached.” Particular proposals for an ecclesial hermeneutic frequently fail to proceed “to an account of the church in which this ecclesial hermeneutic actually resides.”

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Overcoming this lacuna in recent conversations about theological interpretation is no easy task, for ecclesiology is a complex, multifaceted doctrine. To say straightforwardly what the church is notoriously difficult. The reason for this, in part, is that the Bible employs a great diversity of images and metaphors to convey the reality of God’s people. Paul Minear famously suggests that one can find 96 different images for the church in Scripture.\(^{54}\) A similar complexity emerges from the perspective of systematic theology, for theologians commonly recognize that ecclesiology is a synthetic doctrine, which means that many theological loci are included within or implicated by the doctrine of the church. Moreover, ecclesiology as a specific doctrinal locus is a peculiarly modern phenomenon—perhaps even a twentieth century phenomenon—emerging as a distinct object of systematic study only as Christendom begins to wane and the church emerges as one among other religious and social options. Because of its relative youth among Christian doctrines, ecclesiology tends to carry less precision than other loci like Christology or the doctrine of the Trinity. On top of all of this, of course, loom the theological fractures that mar the post-Reformation landscape.

Though ecumenical conversations have helpfully sought common ground, when it comes to the doctrine of the church this usually entails an aggregation of diverse ecclesial images and metaphors rather than a synthetic reimagining of them.

For these reasons, when theologians use the word “church,” the referent is not always clear. Do they mean by it a community, institution, universal body, invisible entity, or something else entirely? To make matters even more confusing, many theologians maintain that “church” cannot be exhausted by a single image or description. In Models of the Church, Avery Dulles writes, “In order to

do justice to the various aspects of the church, as a complex reality, we must work simultaneously with different models. By a kind of mental juggling act, we have to keep several models in the air at once.”

Whereas Dulles hesitates to offer a synthetic ecclesiology that incorporates various models and images into one integrative whole, I take a different approach in this dissertation. I suggest, in brief, that when we situate ecclesiology within the framework of more definitive theological loci we can speak more confidently about its nature and essence. As I explain below, my understanding of the church relies upon my understanding of Jesus. As much as I can make definitive claims about his person and ongoing work, I can make definitive claims about the church as a community of his people. For this reason, my pursuit of a scriptural hermeneutic will require a deeper level of theological analysis. What is God up to in Jesus (Christology)? Why might Jesus call people to himself (ecclesiology)? And why might this God give this book to these people (scriptural hermeneutics)?

To preview what is to come, I propose to understand the church as a confluence of four dynamics, each of which is marked by a particular relationship. Together, these four dynamics constitute the church as a hermeneutical space. In short, the church exists (1) in relationship to the risen Christ, (2) in relationship to its own historical-institutional past, (3) in relationship to a particular place and the concrete bodies gathered there, and (4) in relationship to the world. Each of this dissertation’s four parts focuses on one of these dimensions, showing how its particular aspects

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Dulles, Models of the Church, 14. Dulles seeks a “balanced ecclesiology” that incorporates major affirmations of each model. In so doing, he explicitly rejects a synthetic move: “The peculiarity of models, as contrasted with aspects, is that we cannot integrate them into a single synthetic vision.”
carry hermeneutical significance. More than a mere act of four-ball juggling, I hope to show that these relational dimensions cohere to shape the church as one hermeneutical space. By construing the church primarily in terms of “relationships” rather than “images,” “metaphors,” or “models,” I achieve coherence in a way that most ecclesiological reflection cannot. Whereas ecclesial images and metaphors tend to operate according to spatial or substantial logic, my use of relationships allows me to construe the church in a non-spatial and dynamic manner. While it can be difficult to imagine the essence of an object being simultaneously “x” and “y” (hence the necessity of Dulles’ juggling metaphor), it is far easier to imagine one object simultaneously existing in different identity-defining relationships.

This coherence is important, for I argue that recent proposals within theological interpretation have accentuated particular dimensions of the church, but have failed to do so comprehensively. In other words, explicitly ecclesial hermeneutics commonly display onesided tendencies by relying on a truncated account of the church in which only one dimension of ecclesiology carries hermeneutical significance. Beyond being theoretically deficient, this tendency, I will show, exerts a distortive effect at the level of practice. What is needed, then, is a more complex ecclesiological imagination, the fruit of which will be a more complete and theologically robust account of what it means to read in, as, and for the church.

**The Components of the Argument**

The resurrection stories in Luke 24 serve as the imaginative stimulus for this possibility, for within this text a cluster of factors concurrently shape the process of understanding. This text is
pertinent to my interests because the three stories that comprise it—the women at the tomb, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and Jesus’ visitation of the eleven—all center on the idea of coming to understand. Moreover, the latter two explicitly locate this understanding vis-à-vis the interpretation of Scripture. As Walter Moberly claims of the Emmaus Road story, “It is imaginatively as weighty a story about biblical interpretation and Christ as one could hope to find.”

Unsurprisingly, then, Luke’s resurrection account is commonly cited as justification for upholding the specifically Christological dimension of scriptural hermeneutics. Richard Hays notes of the Emmaus Road story, for example, that “the risen Jesus becomes the definitive interpreter” and the one who graciously grants understanding to his followers. Hays points to the disciples’ passivity in this text—their eyes “were kept” from recognizing him (v. 16) and then during the meal “were opened” to see him (v. 31). By taking agency away from the disciples in this way, the text suggests that Christ is the chief hermeneutical agent, the one who alters the disciples’ faculties of perception and creates genuine understanding.

Importantly, this new understanding is not reducible to the gift of new knowledge about the text. While walking the road to Emmaus, the disciples possess all the data necessary, and in

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56 Moberly, The Bible, Theology, and Faith, 45.


58 All quoted Scripture comes from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

59 Hays, “Reading Scripture in Light of the Resurrection,” 231. This becomes even more obvious in the next pericope: “He opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Lk. 24:45).

60 Of course, neither does it bypass or transcend the text. The interpretation is necessary but not sufficient. Indeed, the active verb depicting the disciples’ agency in convincing Jesus to stay with them—“they urged him strongly” (v. 29)—comes sandwiched between the two passives, suggesting that their action in response to hearing the interpretation is somehow related to and ingredient within Jesus’ action in delivering understanding.
opening their eyes, Jesus does not dispense new information. As Moberly claims of the disciples, “They accurately summarize the Christian story…and yet entirely fail to perceive its significance.”

Hence we are faced with the question: what must happen for accurate knowledge to produce a perception of significance? How does genuine understanding arise?

Even if we grant that Jesus’ interpretive performance on the road informed the disciples of previously unrecognized pieces of the scriptural story, this new information in itself does not produce understanding. In fact, textual “meaning” does not seem all that important to Jesus. The uniqueness of his interpretation has more to do with the way he frames the object of the interpretive process: “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (v. 27, emphasis added). In this story, Jesus paints himself, not the text, as the ultimate object of the hermeneutical process. Of course, even this fundamental shift in the disciples’ interpretive grid does not produce understanding. Ultimately, understanding arises in a moment of grace. It is this grace that grants the disciples a new way of seeing, a new epistemological condition. In this sense, understanding is more fundamentally a Christological event than a textual event. And this reading is “Christological” not in that knowledge about Christ is subsequently imported to the text as an interpretive key (a common model of “Christological exegesis”). Rather than moving from Jesus to the text, the disciples move from the text to Jesus. Contrary to standard assumptions about the task of scriptural interpretation, the moment of illumination is not about knowing Scripture as much as it is about knowing Christ himself.

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62 Moberly, The Bible, Theology, and Faith, 49.
Undoubtedly, then, this text stresses the Christological dimension of interpretation. But this is not the only dimension. After all, Jesus’ presence in the act of interpretation does not, in itself, produce understanding. I mention Luke 24 here in the introduction because as much as it offers hermeneutical insight, it implies that the process of understanding is multidimensional. I suggest, in other words, that a hermeneutic of the resurrected Christ requires a thicker analysis than is normally offered. In this text, the four abovementioned dimensions of Christian existence—the Christological, historical-institutional, communal, and missional—each exerts hermeneutical influence, together shaping the nature of the hermeneutical moment.

For the disciples, the Christological event of understanding, though radically new, does not emerge out of thin air. Christ’s gift of understanding occurs within the context of a historical narrative that gives it shape. Understanding arises, in conversation with knowledge, hopes, and traditions inherited from the past. The “memory” of the women at the tomb is ingredient in their newfound understanding (v. 6, 8). And along with recalling the written traditions, the Emmaus disciples bring a particular historical narrative to the event of understanding—“we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21).

At the same time, the event of understanding is communal, emerging from concrete acts of togetherness, friendship, and hospitality. For the Emmaus disciples, understanding arises as Christ’s own presence and their inherited hopes coalesce in a concrete act of togetherness.63 The

hermeneutical significance of the first two relational dynamics is actualized in a shared space around a shared meal.

Finally, the event of understanding is missional, for the process of understanding is bound up with movement and proclamation. The women immediately went and “told all this to the eleven and to all the rest” (v. 9). Likewise, the Emmaus disciples, upon seeing Christ, immediately “told what had happened on the road” (v. 35). The missional dimensions are most obvious in the final pericope. After opening their minds to understand Scripture (v. 45), Jesus proceeds to lay the groundwork for mission by insisting that his name be proclaimed to all nations (v. 47). In Luke 24, the hermeneutical moment is simultaneously a missional moment.

While understanding is fundamentally a gift arising from the community’s relationship with the Risen One, the process of receiving this gift is a complex affair. Inspired by the example of Luke 24, I contend that while faithful reading is undoubtedly Christological, the process of understanding is a complex process involving historical-institutional, communal, and missional dimensions as well. In this project I seek a holistic ecclesiology that incorporates these dimensions into one coherent vision.

This does not mean that diverse positions can be mashed together; sheer theological montage does not do justice to the underlying unity of the one holy catholic apostolic church. The key to achieving such cohesion, to riff on David Kelsey, is properly balancing the “ultimate” and “proximate” contexts of ecclesial existence.⁶⁴ One serious temptation in theological hermeneutics

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⁶⁴ David Kelsey uses these terms in *Eccentric Existence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) as a means of framing the contours of a theological anthropology. “Theologically speaking, human beings are God’s creatures. The ultimate context into which they are born is God’s relating to them as their creator. Human persons are born into complex networks of other beings that interact with one another and with specifically human beings in dynamic systems
(indeed, in all theology) is to place the socio-historical and the theological in competition, even if only implicitly. This project seeks to avoid this dichotomy, and to do so without taking the easy way out by underrepresenting either dimension. Following the thrust of Luke 24, I suggest that Christ himself, in an event of grace, constitutes the ultimate context of interpretive faithfulness. Yet even as the hermeneutical moment is certainly eventful, it is not sheer event. My goal in this project is to articulate a Christological vision capacious enough to incorporate the other dimensions. As I will argue, a robust account of divine action in framing the ultimate context of interpretation—the church in relation to the living Christ—creates space to consider the various historical, social, and anthropological contexts of faithful reading without lapsing into hermeneutical immanentalism. To frame the hermeneutical process theologically, we must attend both to Jesus’ act of giving understanding and the church’s various modes of receiving it.

It will become evident that the coherence of my project owes much to Bonhoeffer, whose voice serves as the keynote that allows me to draw diverse others into conversation. Not only was Bonhoeffer one of the first to return scriptural hermeneutics to the church, he also provides rich theological resources that give substance to this move. In particular, I argue that a Bonhoefferian account of Christ and the notion of discipleship that this Christ requires (Nachfolge or “following after”) together provide the framework for incorporating ultimate and proximate. In other words, I

of energy and energy exchange that constitute their proximate contexts” (160). Stated more simply, the ultimate context of human life, Kelsey claims, is God and God’s ways of relating to us; the proximate context is the quotidian, the everyday finite realities that constitute the human person’s concrete location in the world (190). While the ultimate cannot be reduced to the proximate, neither can they be severed. To refract Kelsey’s anthropological insights into the ecclesiological realm, the point to note is that talk of God’s action in constituting a people and talk of the community in its material, quotidian dimensions each belong together in a properly theological analysis of the church.
suggest that discipleship, as Bonhoeffer understands it, is a capacious metaphor that allows for various dimensions of ecclesial existence to cohere as one complex theological reality.

My strategy going forward is straightforward. Each of this projects four parts engages a leading strand of theological interpretation. As we will see, each of these strands places hermeneutical priority on one of the four aforementioned dynamics that constitute the church as such. In this way, they helpfully exemplify the role of the church in the reading process, and they offer key insights into the nature of faithful reading. But when one dynamic carries the bulk of the hermeneutical weight, various distortions threaten to ensue. In particular, certain practices and habits become over-burdened. My constructive goal, then, is to explore the hermeneutical potential on offer in these depictions of ecclesial hermeneutics while avoiding their onesided tendencies, thereby offering a more complex and holistic account of the church as a hermeneutical space. Toward this end, each part brings Bonhoeffer into the conversation. Bonhoeffer helps both to diagnose weaknesses in certain hermeneutical proposals and also to offer insights that gesture toward a constructive alternative. This is not to imply that Bonhoeffer is sufficient in and of himself. In fact, by placing him in conversation with others, I add coherence and clarity to his scattered and sometimes enigmatic depictions of scriptural hermeneutics.

Chapter 1 begins by listening to John Webster. Webster is particularly relevant for this project, for he consistently articulates the church in its constitutive relationship to God. In classical Reformed terminology, he speaks of the church as the 
*creatura verbi*, the creature of the word. Moreover, he proceeds to connect this ecclesiology to an account of reading. God’s action in Jesus, he suggests, constitutes the ultimate context of interpretive faithfulness. In this, Webster offers a revelational hermeneutic that foregrounds the presence and activity of the risen Christ. Vis-à-vis the
Risen One, practices of un-mastery and a posture of receptivity constitute the foundation of the church’s hermeneutical endeavors. Chapter 2 turns to Bonhoeffer, who is relevant at just this point, as his ability to hold together “act” and “being” allows him to appreciate Webster’s insights without succumbing to the temptations of hermeneutical immateriality and passivity that often accompany word theologies. While agreeing with Webster’s Christological hermeneutic, Bonhoeffer points toward the proximate contexts of interpretive faithfulness by adding concreteness to the *verb* that constitutes the church. In so doing, he upholds both the theological and the socio-historical dimensions of the church as a hermeneutical space. The chapter concludes by laying the groundwork for a Bonhoefferian hermeneutic of discipleship.

In chapter 3 I listen to Robert Jenson, who grounds interpretive faithfulness within the church as a historical-institutional entity. By means of hermeneutical touchstone and structures of continuity that establish the church’s diachronic identity, Jenson articulates an account of the church that spans the so-called hermeneutical gap, thereby producing hermeneutical faithfulness. To read well, Jenson suggests, one must be traditioned into the church. Institutional practices ground and enable faithful reading. Taken on their own, Webster and Jenson might seem to represent the traditional tension between Protestant and Catholic hermeneutics. At precisely this point of tension Bonhoeffer gestures toward a mediating vision. In chapter 4 I show how Bonhoeffer, like Jenson, possesses an institutional imagination. But whereas Jenson tends to conflate Christ into the institution, Bonhoeffer suggests that the telos of institutional life is encounter with Christ himself. In

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65 Jenson himself, though not Catholic, endorses many features of traditional Catholic hermeneutics. This will become clear in chapter 3.
this way, Bonhoeffer succeeds at situating the church’s institutional identity vis-à-vis its risen Lord. Whereas a onesided account of institutional hermeneutics threatens to confuse Christ’s own voice with the voice of the church, Bonhoeffer suggests that the church exists as a socio-historical entity precisely because Christ calls his people to walk with him through history. Given this account of institutional space, Bonhoeffer points toward a set of Christologically redefined historical-institutional practices.

If God speaks, as I maintain in Part One (chapters 1 and 2), then the community must be equipped to listen. And if the church reads Scripture in light of its past, as I maintain in Part Two (chapters 3 and 4), then the community must be equipped to navigate the ongoing traditioning process. In Part Three I argue that both possibilities are political in nature because they require the gathering of bodies. That is, the church in both its vertical and horizontal dimensions remains hermeneutically vacuous without concrete practices of togetherness. In chapter 5 I listen to Stanley Hauerwas, who is especially helpful in highlighting the necessity of togetherness in the horizontal process of coming to understand. As critics note, his work at times displays “eclesiocentric” tendencies that overburden practices of togetherness and produce an over-realized hermeneutic. I suggest that this criticism is only partially true, for it misses key aspects of Hauerwas’ theology. Nonetheless, I argue that a clearer account of Christ’s resurrected and ascended presence would provide consistency to Hauerwas’ hermeneutical vision. This directs me to chapter 6 in which I examine Bonhoeffer, who both affirms the robustly social character of Christian existence and yet more consistently affirms the role of Christ himself in the hermeneutical process. Especially within his Finkenwalde experiment, Bonhoeffer shows how practices of togetherness are ingredient in forming an addressable community, a community fit to receive Christ’s word. Listening to both
Hauerwas and Bonhoeffer, I suggest that the church exists as a hermeneutical space through the social and material practices that allow people to gather around the text in hopes of hearing Christ’s word therein. I conclude by suggesting that a hermeneutic of discipleship is the means by which the church discerns this word and thereby navigates interpretive conflict.

Part Four (chapters 7 and 8) considers the church as a missional space. Chapter 7 begins by engaging in a twofold exploration. On the one hand, it examines the missional implications of theological interpretation, and, on the other, the hermeneutical implications of missional theology. I make two mirroring claims: that contemporary theological interpretation is beset by a missionally inadequate ecclesiology and that contemporary missional theology has failed fully to explore the hermeneutical implications of a missional ecclesiology. As a means of addressing these shortcomings, I propose reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a missional theologian. In particular, I suggest that his mature ecclesiology provides the basis for an adequately missional hermeneutic. As a means of exploring the concrete form of such a hermeneutic, I turn in chapter 8 to examine William Stringfellow. Though removed from Bonhoeffer by a generation and a continent, Stringfellow proves himself to be his heir, particularly in his ability to unpack the hermeneutical vision that began to emerge in Bonhoeffer’s prison writings. Whereas much theological interpretation relies upon a conception of ecclesial space clearly demarcated from the world and ontologically distinct from it, Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow gesture toward a church that lives in and for the world. And whereas much missional theology limits the hermeneutical implications of mission to the moment of sending, Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow gesture toward the importance of ongoing hermeneutical activity. To read within ecclesial space, I argue, is to read within the movement of mission itself, not merely as a means of sanctioning it. The church’s mission poses the question not merely of how to communicate
Christ (as is commonly recognized), but also the question of how to understand him. In other words, missionary movement and cross-cultural encounter are ingredient within the process of hermeneutical faithfulness, not merely its proper outcome.

Sparked by the process of understanding depicted in Luke’s resurrection stories and guided by a Bonhoefferian account of discipleship, this project seeks to articulate what it means for Christians to read Scripture faithfully. While this dissertation’s animating concerns are deeply theological, they are altogether practical. One of my guiding convictions is that theological articulations are no better than the practices and habits they engender. Thus, a properly theological account of hermeneutical faithfulness is impossible without attention to the actual activities involved in the reading process. Bonhoeffer understood this well, and he proves himself to be a pastoral theologian by the facility with which he moves from the theoretical to the practical realm. Following Bonhoeffer’s example, I hope to make a constructive claim not only about a theology of Scripture or scriptural hermeneutics but about the practices and habits that sustain faithful reading.

While accounts of reading practices commonly take their cues from notions of textuality or interpretation per se, the practices that emerge within my account of the church as a hermeneutical space take their cues from the resurrected Christ and his presence to the community. This is not meant to demean the importance of textual practices. It is to say, however, that one must deploy such practices within the context of a more fundamental posture determined by the church’s relationship to the risen Lord. As the Emmaus Road story implies, the object of understanding is not ultimately the text but Christ himself. In this sense, I am arguing for a set of holistic and embodied hermeneutical practices which, when enacted, sustain the community’s ongoing process of understanding Christ by means of the scriptural text. In so doing, I hope to locate the specifically
scripture-focused practices of recent theological interpretation within a more holistic frame of reference (i.e., the church) that itself always takes shape in reference to the Risen One himself.

At its most basic, then, this is a project about Jesus, his followers, and their use of a book in their ongoing acts of following. Stephen Sykes famously suggests that Christianity is “an essentially contested concept.” It follows, moreover, that one’s claim about the essence of this concept shapes the way one construes the task of reading Scripture as a Christian practice. As I understand Christianity, its essence lies in Jesus, “the absolutely unique, historic one” raised to new life by the Father through the Spirit. Following Bonhoeffer, I center my vision of faith—and hence of all theological loci, including theological hermeneutics—on the “ongoing presence of the synoptic Jesus.” Neither the church nor its reading (nor any other of its practices) make sense apart from the process of following after its irreducibly singular Lord. The universality and lordship of this particular Nazarene creates the church. The challenge here is to prevent this from becoming a mere idea. The Christ who shapes the church and constitutes the foundation of theology remains freely present to the church and the world through the Spirit. The space he creates by calling people to himself is the church’s hermeneutical space, the space in and for which Jesus’ followers faithfully engage their text. Not only does Jesus promise to be always present to his followers (e.g., Matt. 28:20), he promises continually to speak to them in the present—“Let anyone who has an ear listen


68 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 184.
to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, emphasis added). In this project I make an argument for what this listening entails.

While my heavily Christological focus (Part One) may seem to perpetuate the same ecclesial onesidedness I seek to correct, I hope to show that a Bonhoefferian Christology can weave these strands together. By jointly imagining the church’s historical-institutional past (Part Two), life together (Part Three), and missionary relationship to the world (Part Four) in terms of Jesus’ ongoing presence and particularity, we will find the resources necessary to imagine the ecclesiology that serves as a space for faithful reading. What ultimately emerges from this account of Christ and the fourfold account of the church that corresponds to him is a hermeneutic of discipleship, a way of thinking vis-à-vis Scripture that takes place in the wake of Christ’s ongoing action and ultimately aims at participation in it.
PART ONE: THE CHURCH AS THE CREATURA VERBI

Theological hermeneutics recognizes that understanding is a gift. As the disciples on the road to Emmaus learned, good interpretation hits home through the grace of Christ’s presence. This obviously challenges the prevailing assumptions of modern scriptural interpretation. Karl Barth was one of the first to recognize this. In response to a hermeneutical situation naturalized by historicist assumptions, he boldly sought to reclaim space for God’s voice. His motivation for doing so was pastoral: historicism would not preach. “I myself know what it means year in year out to mount the steps of the pulpit, conscious of the responsibility to understand and to interpret…and yet, utterly incapable, because at the University I had never been brought beyond that well-known ‘Awe in the presence of History.’”¹ A simple assumption moved Barth beyond the confines of his theological inheritance: God is a living God, and within the Bible, the whole of which is human litera, this God lives, speaks, and acts.²

In Part One, I explore this claim by examining the interrelation of divine action and ecclesial existence and then, subsequently, by highlighting the implications this has for hermeneutical faithfulness. The basic conviction guiding my analysis is simple: one cannot provide a theologically serious account of ecclesiology or scriptural hermeneutics without first accounting for God’s agency in Christ and through the Spirit. More specifically, I suggest that the church functions hermeneutically in virtue of its relationship to the Risen One. For Christian theology, the resurrection is the antidote to hermeneutical naturalism.

¹ Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, 9.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John Webster will be my primary conversation partners in Part One. Bringing these two together reveals real points of resonance and real differences of emphasis. Webster, more than Bonhoeffer, explores the theological mechanics of the *creatura verbi*, particularly by framing it within an account of God’s eternal nature; Bonhoeffer, more than Webster, presses this theological vision toward the realm of concretion. Lest we confuse proximate and ultimate, it will be necessary to follow Webster’s lead by placing theological priority on God’s being and action. I undertake this task in chapter 1. As he demonstrates, certain hermeneutical distortions arise when we lose sight of Jesus’ prevenient perfection and subsequently confuse the divine and human elements of the church. But Webster does not take us as far as we need to go, in part because of his reluctance to attend to the proximate elements of hermeneutical faithfulness. Thus I will supplement his argument in chapter 2 by listening to Bonhoeffer, who more consistently depicts the concrete, material, and practical dimensions of the church.

Taken together, these two voices create a conversation about the nature of hermeneutical faithfulness within the church as the *creatura verbi*. In listening to them I am asking: what is going on theologically when we speak about God’s revelatory relationship to the church in and through Scripture? What does an emphasis on the *verbum* imply about the nature of ecclesial space? And what does this imply about the concrete act of engaging Scripture and forming communities for the sake of this engagement? This line of questioning leads to what I call a hermeneutic of discipleship, the contours of which I sketch in chapter 2 below.
Chapter 1: John Webster, the *Creatura Verbi*, and Hermeneutical Space

Our first step toward a holistic account of reading in the church is to listen to Webster. He offers a theological account of the ultimate context of interpretation: the church as it exists in relationship to God’s action in the risen Christ. In terms of classical Reformation theology, I am searching for an account of the church as the *creatūra verbi*, the creature of the word.³

Such a goal will surely elicit reactions, for it is often feared that “word theologies” erode genuine ecclesiological reflection. Henri de Lubac, for example, notes the risk of spiritualism and the subtle slide toward “ecclesial Monophysitism” that can arise in Protestant accounts of the church.⁴ This argument quickly becomes hermeneutical. It is precisely the thinness of Reformation ecclesiologies, so the argument goes, that ceded space for historical-critical practices to flourish.⁵ It would seem, then, that reestablishing a traditionally Catholic ecclesiological vision would provide the tools necessary to articulate a theologically rigorous account of Christian interpretive practices. Such logic has driven much of the recent effort to recover a distinctly theological interpretation of Scripture.⁶

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⁵ For a recent example of this argument, see Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a recent defense of the Protestant Scripture principle in light of such critiques, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016).

⁶ The general trend toward *Ressourcement* theology has roots in de Lubac’s magisterial work, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*. This trend’s impact on Protestant interpretive thought is readily evident; see, as a prime example, David Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 26-38.
Given this reasoning, it might seem strange to argue for a theological mode of reading grounded in the church as the creatura verbi. Can this fund a distinctly ecclesial form of interpreting Scripture? If “church” vanishes behind “word,” as critics justifiably worry, then surely little hermeneutical gain is found in this manner of reflection. Ecclesiological spiritualism would leave us hermeneutically hopeless.

It will become evident in what follows that even as I reference the basic Catholic criticism of word theologies, I do not intend to seek a via media between them. The conversation carried out in this project remains distinctly intra-Protestant. Here in Part One I listen to some leading Catholic voices not because I want to make my argument amenable to Catholic theology (though I am certainly not against finding points of rapprochement) but because I want to highlight the very real liabilities lurking within Protestant ecclesiology. As I attempt to show, it is precisely by attending to the one who creates the church that we are able to turn to the church in pursuit of a genuinely theological hermeneutic of scripture.

**Divine Perfection, Christology, and “Negative Ecclesiology”**

Toward this end, I turn now to engage John Webster, one of contemporary Protestantism’s most able theological representatives. His recent theology reads as a sustained hermeneutical manifesto, an attack on what he calls the “dogmatic mislocation” of Scripture and interpretation within modern theology.⁷ He “resists the quasi-axiomatic status accorded to an anthropology of the

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interpreting subject” prevalent in modern hermeneutical theory and instead gives “sustained attention to a figure who has virtually disappeared from theological hermeneutics in the modern era, namely Jesus.”

In order to make this claim, he takes great care, especially in his most recent work, to ground God’s outward activity in God’s wholly realized life in eternity. By stressing divine perfection he thus resists trends in twentieth century theology that attempt to re-conceptualize the church’s traditional ontological language. The problem with these approaches, Webster suggests, is that while rightly accounting for the humanity of Jesus, they risk neglecting the prevenience of divine being and work.

The ramifications of this neglect ripple across the spectrum of theological reflection, though they are especially acute in the hermeneutical realm, particularly as they lead to accounts of hermeneutical space divorced from divine action. While a revisionary approach to divine being does not necessarily entail hermeneutical naturalism, Webster alerts us to the coincidence of the two by suggesting that the “naturalization” of the biblical text and the act of reading it are direct corollaries of the naturalization or historicization of the church’s talk about God. Indeed, as a discrete discipline, hermeneutics emerged in tandem with the separation of the Bible from theology, which itself mirrored a more fundamental separation between divine action and historical reality. In this sense, hermeneutical reflection emerges from historicist soil.

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8 Webster, “Hermeneutics in Modern Theology,” 308.


10 This is why Hans Frei claims, “Generally… hermeneutics and biblical-historical criticism grew up together” (Eclipse, 104). He argues that whereas classical interpreters assumed that the literal and historical senses of Scripture were identical, the emergence of a gap between the two senses conditioned the emergence of the hermeneutical task in its modern form. Schleiermacher stands as a prime example. Often called the father of modern hermeneutics, his account
Webster responds by going straight to the root. He contends that “the tide of God’s loving acts toward creatures” flows from the “infinite ocean” of God’s being.\(^{11}\) For him, an account of “God’s infinitely deep, fully realized life” \(^{12}\) in se serves as the foundation for theological hermeneutics. Care is here required, lest this emphasis on eternity draws focus away from history. While Webster may seem susceptible to this danger, as critics sometimes fear, he consistently insists that attention to God’s perfection need not entail the neglect of the economy. Though the economy obviously takes priority in the order of intellect, this “should not be mistaken for the drastically different (and calamitous) dogmatic claim that the only significant distinctions are those enacted in the theater of God’s external works.”\(^{13}\) Real distinction exists on both sides of the economic-immanent divide, for the eternal inner-trinitarian relation between paternity and filiation is intrinsic to divine perfection.\(^{14}\) In this sense, Webster is careful to note that “the primacy of theology proper should not be so inordinately emphasized that the proper glory of God’s works of nature and grace is diminished.”\(^{15}\) The eternal processions that constitute God’s perfection ground and make possible the economic missions, which is why Webster insists that eternal divine being includes evangelical presupposes that historical distance, and hence misunderstanding, is the interpretive norm. The solution to this situation is interpretive activity that bridges the gap between then and now by using interpretive skill to dig through the text to its original underlying experience. Lost within a vision like Schleiermacher’s, Webster suggests, is the sense in which God’s agency is involved in spanning the perceived hermeneutical gap. On the relation between historicism and historical criticism more generally, see Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) and Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).


12 Webster, *The Domain of the Word*, xi.

13 Webster, “Perfection and Participation,” 383.

14 Webster, *The Domain of the Word*, 33.

movement, a secondary though no less real expression of God’s love. While God’s being does not depend on the missions, they are no mere epiphenomena; God’s outer works—with within the realm of which falls the church’s hermeneutical enterprise—remain aspects of the doctrine of God.

This account of God’s being allows one to situate historical realities within the scope of divine work. Paradigmatically, this means that Jesus’ historicity does not compete with but is enabled by divine activity. Webster thus insists that the church’s understanding of Jesus be “undergirded by an immensely powerful theology of God’s perfection.” A particular Christological error animates this claim. “One illuminating way to write the history of modernity would be to envisage it as the story of the steady eclipse in the belief in Jesus’ presence.” Once Jesus ceases to be seen as a “presently operative and communicative figure…other doctrinal areas expand to fill the gap vacated by his removal.” Prime among them is ecclesiology. Stated simply, Webster fears that talk of church comes to fill in for talk of Christ. Consequently, he understands much of his dogmatic work as “negative ecclesiology,” as a prophylactic measure against dogmatic distortion. By means of turning to a classical account of divine being and a corresponding account of Jesus’ perfection, he attempts “to win back to Christology” territory which has been annexed by talk of the church.

At this point Webster may seem to confirm critics’ worst fears that word theologies carry an anti-ecclesiological bent. I will address this concern more fully below, for it carries some truth. For now, in fairness to Webster, we should note the specificity of his theological agenda. The negative

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16 Webster, Domain of the Word, 83.


18 Ibid., 3.
tone of his ecclesiology is elicited not by the nature of the church per se but by perceived ecclesiastical shortcomings.

Webster has one particular such shortcoming in mind: the blurring of the distinction between word and church. This danger is evident, for example, within Milbank’s suggestion that the person and work of Jesus are resolvable into the church, or within “communion ecclesiology” that make the church the means of Christ’s presence to the world. While these ecclesiosies have the virtue of accounting for the church’s visibility, they risk implying what Calvin refers to as the *crass mixtura* between God and his people. In being heavily invested in an ontological union between Christ and church, these accounts of the church risk implying a “porous Christology” and thereby eliding the “utter difference” between God and creatures. The hermeneutical danger here can only be stated briefly in anticipation of a fuller treatment in chapters 3 and 4: when the difference between Christ and the church is collapsed and the alterity of the text compromised, readers find themselves within a hermeneutical space that lacks the leverage by means of which Scripture can become God’s speech to the church. Consequently, a church that should be listening instead finds itself speaking. In this sense, the *crass mixtura* presses toward a particular instantiation of hermeneutical naturalism.

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21 At this point, Webster’s Reformed heritage becomes especially pronounced. He believes that contemporary communion ecclesologies replicate Osiander’s error of proffering a “gross mixture of Christ with believers”; see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendricks, 2008), 481–482 (3.11.10).

For now, we should note that growing out of Webster’s account of the Trinity and Christology is an ecclesiology not confined to natural or social categories. The *creatura verbi* has its being within the Triune economy of grace, as the “first fruits of God’s utterance.”23 Hence he confidently proclaims, “Church’ is not a struggle to make something happen, but a lived attempt to make sense of, celebrate and bear witness to what has already been established by God’s grace.”24 The church exists, most simply, because Christ calls people to himself. The *creatura verbi*, therefore, is the collection of people gathered around the Risen One, the space that exists because of his grace and in the wake of his call.

In its response to the “already” of God’s grace, the church certainly possesses social dimensions. In this, Webster remains alert to the danger of construing the church in a onesidedly invisible manner. Yet he distinguishes his position by noting that the church is not identical *simpliciter* with its visibility. Its social-material dimensions always take shape in the wake of the Risen One.25 As the *creatura verbi*, its being is a gift, never its own creation, which implies that the church’s visible existence is not a social project but remains derivative of its primary task of attending to Christ.

**A Revelational Hermeneutic**

This brief tour through the logic of Webster’s theology reveals how dogmatic work in the doctrine of God pays off in ecclesiology. This puts me in a position now to ask: what does the reading of Scripture look like in this space, and how can the church do it faithfully?


At this point, Webster’s hermeneutical vision owes much to Barth’s early theological imagination. A God who exists in divine freedom is not a God human beings can reach by means of unaided creaturely capacities. Knowledge of God is necessarily a gift. Hence we situate creaturely knowledge of God within the realm of God’s self-giving desire, God’s active willingness to share divine self-knowledge with creatures. God gives this knowledge, of course, by speaking to humanity in and as Jesus Christ. Mediated by the written witness of the prophets and apostles, this speech reverberates through history. By means of the voice of the text we encounter the voice of God in Christ.

Because we are dealing with a living and active God, we cannot limit God’s activity vis-à-vis the text to the process of textual production (a process usually depicted in terms of “inspiration”). Even during the reading process, God remains active. God’s revelatory activity initiated the texts, has sustained them through time, and continues to remain operative in our reading today. When reflecting on the hermeneutical enterprise, we are dealing with revelation in the present tense. God has spoken, and as the Risen One, God continues to speak. Thus Bonhoeffer rightly worries when

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26 Webster takes this axiom to be dogmatically foundational. See, e.g., *God Without Measure*, Vol. 1, 8-9. Here he echoes Kierkegaard’s belief in an “infinite qualitative distinction” between time and eternity, which famously shapes Barth’s hermeneutical vision in the second edition of his *The Epistle to the Romans*.

27 For a more thorough and nuanced account of this logic, see Barth’s notion of the three forms of the one Word of God in *Church Dogmatics* I/2: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 457-537. Webster utilizes a constructive notion of sanctification and inspiration to explain this possibility: “Sanctification is the act of God the Holy Spirit in hallowing creaturely processes, employing them in the service of the taking form of revelation within the history of the creation” (*Holy Scripture*, 17-18). For an account of double agency discourse, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Also see Scott Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 35.


the doctrine of inspiration functions as a surrogate for the resurrection. The two certainly belong together, but when properly ordered, inspiration functions in light of resurrection, for the Risen One exercises his eloquent activity through the vehicle of the text.

Within the domain of the risen Christ, textual language is more than a means of information; it is—or at least it can become—the means of Christ’s address, the means by which Christ’s word “strikes home” to the reader. Emphasizing the verbal agency of the Resurrected One thereby prevents us from seeing the text as an inert historical object. If Christ’s address comes to the church through the text, it cannot be reduced to it in an unqualified sense. Revelation includes textuality but is not limited thereby. In the presence of Christ, understanding is not understanding of language, but understanding through it. Within the creatura verbi, readers of Scripture are concerned with how the subject-matter of the text might come to speech today through the written word.

At least one implication follows that contains huge significance for this project: we must differentiate between understanding the text qua text and understanding God’s word to the church in and through it. Hearing the text is not tantamount to hearing God, even as the latter is inseparably bound to the former. Within the creatura verbi, interpretive activity respects what Garrett Green calls “hermeneutical breathing space”—the critical gap between text and interpretation that

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30 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 12, 331.
31 Webster, Domain of the Word, 118.
32 The notion of Scripture’s “becoming” might seem to downplay or even undermine its status as the word of God, but Bruce McCormack argues otherwise in “The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism,” in Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 55-75. The notion of striking home (treffen) comes from Ernst Fuchs, Studies in the Historical Jesus, trans. Andrew Scobie (Naperville, IL: A.R. Allenson, 1964), 196-8, 202.
leaves room for newness and thereby prevents interpreters from exhausting the text or undialectically equating it with God’s voice.\textsuperscript{34}

Here I continue to affirm Webster’s distinction between God and creatures; this distinction, basic to the logic of ecclesiology in the domain of the risen Christ, applies to bibliology as well. If God remains Lord over knowledge of God, it follows that texts have no revelatory authority independent of God’s gracious initiative. Accordingly, within a hermeneutical space determined by Christ’s address, the interpreter cannot pry revelatory meaning from Scripture as if it were a predicate of the text itself, a quantity to be abstracted through textual practices (whether historical, critical, theological, or anything else).

\textit{The Priority of Posture}

While emphasizing God’s freedom in revelation should not undermine the commonplace practice of reading the text, it does require us to situate this practice theologically. We again see the value of theological ordering. As Webster demonstrates, the human activity of reading does not encroach on God’s freedom, for the conception of transcendence operative in his doctrine of God allows him to avoid the common pitfall of placing creaturely exegetical activity and divine revelatory activity in a competitive relationship.\textsuperscript{35} The same Spirit who inspired the biblical authors without setting aside their creatureliness also inspires readers, \textit{qua} readers, to receive their textual witness.

\textsuperscript{34} Garrett Green, \textit{Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200), 183.

\textsuperscript{35} Webster, \textit{Holy Scripture}, 68ff. For a helpful articulation of how a doctrine of God’s transcendence can fund a non-competitive account of agency, see Kathryn Tanner, \textit{Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 1-34.
Tying these points together, we now see how Christ’s presence through the Spirit constitutes the church’s hermeneutical situation. The conviction operative in the modern paradigm is that hermeneutical space is in fact no-space, an interpretive vantage point free of conviction, tradition, and history. Echoing Paul Ricoeur, Webster writes, “Running parallel to the naturalization of the text there is the ‘deregionalization’ of practices of interpretation, a standardization of its operations and ends which takes its rise in a natural anthropology of the interpreter and interpretative reason.”

Webster responds by attempting to “re-regionalize” the interpretive enterprise, insisting that within the domain of Christ’s resurrected presence, “Christian reading of Scripture is an instance of itself.” It follows that vis-à-vis the Resurrected One who constitutes hermeneutical space, there are no indeterminate readers. “Through baptism the Christian reader has been placed in the sphere of church and canon.”

We therefore resist a certain interpretive tendency prevalent in modern hermeneutics: the treatment of Christian reading as an iteration of a general phenomenon of reading. Though analogous to other acts of reading, reading Scripture within the church “is in its deepest reaches sui generis.” Establishing the “overlaps between Christian and other reading,” while helpful in some regards, “eclipses what in fact is most interesting about what happens when Christians read the Bible: that the Bible as text is the viva vox Dei addressing the people of God and generating faith and obedience.”

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36 Webster, Domain of the Word, 6.
37 Webster, “Hermeneutics in Modern Theology,” 317.
38 Webster, Domain of the Word, 73.
39 Webster, Holy Scripture, 72.
40 Webster, “Hermeneutics in Modern Theology,” 317.
While Webster follows the recent trend by highlighting interpretation’s ecclesial home, his emphasis on Christ’s priority over the community leads him to nuance his account of re-regionalization in important ways. Because the church is created by an external word, he treads carefully when addressing the ecclesiality of interpretation. “There is a proper externality to Scripture in relation to the church, not because Scripture exists in abstraction from its audience, but because in attending to Scripture the church is not attending to its own voice but to that of the unconfined and self-announcing Risen One from whose mouth Scripture issues.” While he insists that those who read Scripture are the redeemed, he is equally clear that, in the most technical sense, Scripture does not belong to the church. “Scripture is not the church’s book, something internal to the community’s discursive practices; what the church hears in Scripture is not its own voice.” Rather than belonging to the church, Scripture belongs to the risen Christ.

Here we see, most clearly, the hermeneutical corollary to an ecclesiology that accents Christ’s constitutive address; the text belongs in the church even as it does not belong to the church. This further suggests that interpretation is not properly theological simply in virtue of its audience (e.g., church goers rather than academicians); nor is interpretation theological in virtue of tutelage in a particular tradition. Instead, interpretation is theological in virtue of its relationship to the risen Christ who calls the church into being, gifts it with the canon, and continues to address it through the textual medium of revelation.

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41 Webster, The Domain of the Word, 44-45.
43 Webster, The Domain of the Word, 32.
This interplay between Scripture as *external* to the community and the reading of it as an *internal* practice gives particular shape to the nature of hermeneutics within the *creatura verbi*. The “how” of God’s speech—and thus the proper externality of Scripture to the church—remains a gift of grace beyond analytic control or manipulation. Theological reflection in relation to God’s free speech faithfully fulfills its duty not by explaining the logic of this speech *per se* but by sketching the theological domain in which the church receives it. Yet here we press further by considering the “how” of the church’s listening. Unlike the “how” of God’s speech, this properly becomes an object of concrete focus. This is not to say that the reception of revelation is a natural event or a capacity inherent to creatures as such. We continue to affirm that creatures only know God through God’s grace. But just as God speaks by means of written human words, the church hears by means of an array of enacted human practices. And just as the written words remain open to critical analysis (even as this analysis does not, in and of itself, lead to God’s voice), so too the church’s practices of listening remain an object of concrete reflection (even as this reflection will never guarantee that the church hears).

**Asymmetry and Hermeneutical Activity**

From a vantage point in Webster’s ecclesiology, it becomes clear that prioritizing Christ over the church resources a specific account of hermeneutical activity. In all that it does, the church is fundamentally a hearing church, a church that has its being in the act of turning toward Christ’s

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voice. Here we arrive at the heart of Webster’s hermeneutical insight. Emphasizing the livelihood and loquaciousness of the Risen One places the interpreter in a particular hermeneutical orientation, a particular posture. Because Holy Scripture is an alien reality, an exogenous element of communal life, the church is essentially “a domain of receiving.” Hence all ecclesial activity, hermeneutical or otherwise, grows from the same core task: to receive the gospel. The church must read, Webster claims, from a posture of “self-renunciation before the presence and action of God.” More than any technique or method of interpretation, this posture is hermeneutically foundational. An account of God’s freedom in the revelatory event places the church in a posture of receptivity.

The Threat of Hermeneutical Passivity

Webster’s emphasis on interpretive posture remains open to certain criticisms. Balthasar’s famous appraisal of the early Barth comes quickly to mind: “Actualism, with its constant, relentless reduction of all activity to God…leaves no room for any other center of activity outside of God. In relation to God, there can only be passivity.” While Webster nuances his account of ecclesial agency, his notion of interpretation as “active passivity or passive activity” nevertheless seems to fall within the range of Balthasar’s critique. Moreover, by prioritizing the divine address and the hermeneutical necessity of renunciation in relation to it, it might seem that Webster offers an

45 Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” 111.
46 Webster, The Domain of the Word, 25 and “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” 110.
47 Webster, “The Church as Witnessing Community” 21.
48 Webster, Holy Scripture, 72.
50 Webster, Holy Scripture, 72.
inherently eventful account of the church that lacks historical stability and concrete creaturely dimensions. All forms of human activity, it would seem, are at best ancillary to the true being of the church.

Balthasar’s critical insight has appeared in several iterations. Others have alleged, for example, that a theology of the word pressures toward to a “bifurcation” of the true church (an invisible spiritual reality) from the empirical church (a visible historical reality). Word theologies, therefore, threaten to devolve into a form of “ecclesiological Nestorianism” in which the church consists of something like two natures only occasionally united. This “ecclesiological occasionalism” threatens to undermine any sense of continuity in ecclesial existence. Suffering from a Christological constriction, the Barthian vision onesidedly emphasizes God’s revelatory action in Christ and thereby leaves no space for ongoing historical and ecclesial activity to participate in God’s grace. In short, the theology of the word evident in Barth, Webster, and others seems to represent an especially acute instance of what Yves Congar refers to as the “absence in Protestant thought of a genuine ecclesiology.” However precisely we parse the issue, that danger is that the church’s visible dimensions are reduced to the level of a “mere secular institution.” As a supernatural body, the church is but a fleeting moment. In this case, its perduring spatial dimensions


55 De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 75.
remain disconnected from God’s activity. The church’s concrete activity borders on meaninglessness—“God is in heaven, and man wanders here alone on his poor earth.”

If this is the case, can hermeneutical practices achieve anything significant? Balthasar gets to the heart of this problem: “Viewed from above, the Church completely coincides with God’s Word; but, viewed from below, all her attempts to give expression to this Word are radically fallible.” As a secular space, the church will certainly engage in visible activities, but is this anything more than a mere “wandering alone” that remains “radically fallible”? If not, it would seem that within the 
\textit{creatura verbi} the church’s hermeneutical endeavors amount to nothing more than a chasing after the wind. If this is so, can the church really function as a hermeneutical space?

These threats are real. In this project, I foreground the hermeneutical significance of a posture of receptivity. Yet I also want to take seriously the danger of anti-ecclesial passivity. The point of a robust doctrine of revelation is not to render human action meaningless but to give it distinct shape. This is the point I have been driving at. The notion of interpretive posture reminds us that the \textit{doctrine of revelation} ought to generate \textit{practices of revelation}. In fact, such practices are one of doctrine’s proper fruits, proof that the church deploys theological concepts faithfully. Below I sketch an account of reading practices that ought to arise from a posture of receptivity. Before this, however, I must lay some ecclesiological groundwork. For this, I turn to Bonhoeffer.

\textit{Bonhoeffer on the Unity of Act and Being}

\footnote{Balthasar, \textit{Theology of Karl Barth}, 365.}

\footnote{Ibid., 107.}
The charge of “ecclesiological Nestorianism” obviously calls to mind Christological debates. Without taking the analogy between incarnation and ecclesiology too seriously, one basic insight emerges from this comparison: as in Christological debates, the issue here becomes not whether the church is constituted by divine and creaturely dimensions, but how they relate. If the danger is a onesided eventfulness that severs the two, the solution requires a precise and nuanced account of their relation.

Importantly for this project, the charge against Protestant hermeneutics also arises within Protestantism itself. Here Bonhoeffer becomes especially helpful for my analysis. Indeed, he was one of the first theologians to criticize the actualistic and anti-ecclesiological tendencies in Barth’s theology of the word. At the same time, however, he affirms the fundamentally Christological nature of ecclesial existence. I suggest that Bonhoeffer succeeds at articulating the Christ-church relationship in a manner that both prioritizes Christ’s address in creating and sustaining the church (with Webster) and yet avoids the bifurcation or “Nestorianism” that sometimes follows.

Though it is not commonly recognized, Balthasar’s famous criticism of Barth’s ontology of grace draws insights from Bonhoeffer’s much earlier criticism. Balthasar notes that “Bonhoeffer already realized this [i.e., the inseparability of event and ontology] in 1931 in his penetrating study _Akt und Sein_, which tried to unify a theology of actualism with a theology of being-in-Christ, that is, an ontology of the Church.” As the very title of Bonhoeffer’s _Habilitationsschrift_ makes clear, he insists on thinking of event and being together. Balthasar’s more famous critique echoes Bonhoeffer’s original insight: Barth fails to take sufficient account of what God has _actually done_ in Jesus and, consequently, underplays the extent to which the ongoing historicity of the church

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58 Ibid., 365.
community is central to revelation. As Balthasar rephrases the matter: “God’s revelation can only be an event if something actually takes place.” There is no act without being, no being without act. For Bonhoeffer, Barth’s stress on the eventful and gratuitous nature of divine discourse implies that God’s word is always arriving but never present. Learning from Barth’s mistake, Bonhoeffer rearticulates his emphasis on divine freedom, yet does so while leaving space for a concrete community: “God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings…God is not free from human beings but for them…God is present, that is, not in eternal nonobjectivity but…‘haveable,’ graspable in the Word within the church.” Bonhoeffer affirms that Christ’s freedom and promeity are discrete dimensions of his existence, yet he also insists that one can never imagine them in isolation from each other. Because of who Christ is, act and being never splinter.

By stressing the inseparability of act and being, by claiming that God has freely given Godself to humanity in Jesus Christ, and by insisting that the community as a historical reality is central to God’s revealing activity, Bonhoeffer’s voice resonates with Balthasar’s driving insights. At the same time, Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutical vision resonates with Webster’s, particularly as he notes that the church’s existence as the *creatura verbi* implies that its practices are marked by what Bonhoeffer calls the paradoxical action of *being called* by the Lord. The church has its being not on its own initiative but in the freedom of Christ’s address.

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59 Ibid., 364.


61 Ibid., 90-91.


63 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 207.
This dimension of Bonhoeffer’s thinking makes him amenable to Webster. In fact, Webster often turns to Bonhoeffer in order to draw insights regarding the church’s hermeneutical situation. But is Webster wise to do so? Certain strands of Bonhoeffer’s own thinking would suggest not. Bonhoeffer’s famous claim that the church is “Christ-existing-as-community,” for example, seems to prefigure the communion ecclesiologies that Webster’s “negative ecclesiology” seeks to counteract. Does this formulation subsume Christ into his community, thereby making grace objectively available in the church? Is this the *crass mixtura* Webster hopes to avoid?

If Bethge is right, the answer to these questions is “no.” He notes that Bonhoeffer never intended his ecclesiological formulation—Christ-existing-as-community—to be true in reverse. Bethge suggests that Bonhoeffer articulates an account of the church that distinguishes Christ, the head, while taking seriously Christ’s *unity* with the church, his body. Because of this theological sensibility, Bonhoeffer affirms that Christ exists as the community without assuming that the community necessarily represents Christ. For Bonhoeffer, Christ is the church in the sense that the head is always with his body—but the church is not Christ, for the body does not control the head. In this way, Bonhoeffer upholds Christ’s Lordship. Like Webster, he insists that one “rule out any idea of a mystical fusion between church-community and Christ.”

If a stress on distinction presses toward invisibility, and if a stress on unity presses toward objectifying grace, Bonhoeffer’s ability to walk the fine line of unity-in-distinction allows him to emphasize the concrete aspects of ecclesial

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64 In particular, see Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 78-85 and “‘In the Shadow of Biblical Work’: Barth and Bonhoeffer on the Reading Bible,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 17, no. 1 (2001): 75-91.


66 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 220.
existence without undermining the sense in which grace is always a gift that the church must receive anew. For Bonhoeffer, then, the church is always needy, but it never wanders alone.

His ability simultaneously to distinguish and unify captures the best of the Protestant ecclesiological impulse without lapsing into its most conspicuous errors. At the heart of the Protestant vision lies what Christoph Schwöbel calls the “fundamental asymmetry” between divine and human agency, the ability to imagine a church that is both united to God’s activity and yet asymmetrically ordered in relation to it. This theological sensibility was originally intended to temper inflated accounts of ecclesial practices—most infamously, the practice of indulgences. In response to this inflation, Martin Luther prioritized God’s gracious initiative in salvation, thereby preventing ecclesial activity from over-reaching its capacity.

Given the particular pastoral danger that animates this sensibility, Schwöbel observes that a certain critical tone characterizes Protestant theology: “Against the misguided… identification of God’s action and a specific form of human action, this distinction had to be stressed as much as possible.” The extent to which the Reformers were able to sustain this balance is a point of debate, and it is likely true that Luther’s polemical context contributes to his tendency at times to stress distinction at the expense of identity. Yet Schwöbel reminds us, “One can only accuse Luther’s ecclesiology of onesided spiritualism if one interprets the distinction between opus Dei and opus hominum as a rigid separation and overlooks the essential relation of divine and human action in the church.” He further states, “The fundamental lesson to be learnt from the ecclesiology of the

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67 Schwöbel, “Creature of the Word,” 137.

68 Ibid., 130.
Reformers is the art of distinguishing and relating *opus Dei* and *opus hominum.* In short, the response to the charge of ecclesiological Nestorianism is not to abandon the Reformation vision of the *creatura verbi* but to re-learn the importance of the fundamental asymmetry and ordered unity between Christ and his community.

**Reading as an “Activity of Faith”**

This notion of fundamental asymmetry helps make sense of Webster’s ecclesiology. Though his accent on passivity will elicit critical response, he remains sensitive to the unity-in-distinction fundamental to ecclesial existence. God’s speech in Christ generates “a social space,” he suggests, and “takes public form.” Driving his ecclesiology is not the conviction that the church should recede from view, but that it should be properly ordered in relation to Christ. Just as Christ’s address calls forth a real social space, the activity in this space has real material and social reality, even if it is conditioned by a prior call.

Likewise, even while openly rejecting contemporary trends by insisting on a sense of ecclesial invisibility, he does not intend for the church to vanish. He instead argues for a *particular form* of visibility. “It is through the Spirit’s work alone that the church becomes visible,” which means that “the visibility of the church is…a spiritual event.” He goes on to suggest that when understood in this way, the church’s visibility must properly be labeled a “spiritual visibility.” He emphasizes event

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69 Ibid., 149.

70 Webster, “The Church and the Perfection of God,” 76.

71 Webster, *The Domain of the Word.* 22.

72 Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” 102-103.
in order to make “a standing denial of any easy identification of divine and human work.” Yet given an asymmetrical unity, the denial of an easy identification need not imply the denial of all identification. Thus Webster writes, “An ecclesiology of the Word should be animated by a sense of the distinction—but not separation—of Word and church, of *sermo divina* and its reception.”

This distinction presses toward a certain account of ecclesial activity. Because of the fundamentally asymmetrical nature of the unity between Christ and the church, “passive” and “active” do not exist on the same plane; they are not of equal type and consequently do not compete for space. Bonhoeffer recognizes this when he asserts that faithful activity assumes a particular anthropology. Within the church, the very being of the human has antecedently been determined by the divine address. He explains the significance of this by distinguishing *esse* from *habitus*. The former determines the latter. In relation to God, Christian *esse* is being a sinner forgiven; Christian *habitus* is the “activity of faith” that follows from being forgiven. In its passivity, faith is not one act among others in the Christian life. Rather, faith is the basic orientation of all human activity, the framework within which all other activity is carried out. The activity of faith is “human activity bent to the service of God.” Faith, in this sense, is not fundamentally a matter of content but of existential and spiritual bearing. Faith is our response to God’s address, an act of letting happen, an act of reception. The passivity of faith does not negate activity; rather, it determines its shape. For a church created by God’s word, all visible activity arises from this orientation. For Bonhoeffer, the activity of faith is necessarily visible behavior. Yet as the activity of faith, it remains alert to its *esse*. The activity

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73 Webster, *Word and Church*, 197.

74 Webster, *The Domain of the Word*, 24.

75 Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 12, 231.

76 Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” 107.
of faith recognizes that it will be the means by which the church participates in Christ’s ongoing activity, even as it never presumes its activity to be identifiable with his. In this, Bonhoeffer’s account of “activity of faith” operates according to a similar material logic as does Webster’s “passive activity,” yet without the potentially distortive implications of passivity.

We can extend this logic to the hermeneutical realm: as receptive activity, interpretation is an activity of faith. The church’s interpretive practices are alert to the possibility of their own sinfulness and to the necessary distinction between their productions and Christ’s gift. This is not to deny the importance of readerly activity in all its dimensions; instead, it places an important caution sign above all of it. As Bonhoeffer argues, “we must read this book with all of our human resources.” But this is not an event of “making happen.” Within Christological space, hermeneutical activity is essentially an act of hope that “through the Bible in its fragility God comes to meet us as the Risen One.” In this particular sense, reading is a mode of listening, an activity by which the interpreting subject becomes attentive and expectant. As the creature of the word, the church is a hermeneutical space of expectation. Having received its very being from the gratuitous presence of the Risen One, the church engages in practices that continue to hope for this presence anew.

Reading “Against Ourselves”

Rather than activity that “wanders alone” or passively waits, as some might fear, the account of hermeneutical space that has heretofore emerged suggests that reading Scripture is activity carried out in a particular interpretive posture—one of genuine openness, humility, and receptivity. No

77 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 12, 331.
78 Ibid.
particular set of textual practices guarantees such a posture. The danger, Bonhoeffer realized, was that one could produce technically skilled readings of Scripture that served merely to echo back the interpretive interests brought to the text. One could deploy the same set of interpretive practices in a posture of listening for God’s voice or as a mode of propagating a particular interpretive agenda.

The threat of non-receptivity energized Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutical imagination. At an ecumenical conference in 1932 he succinctly highlights the danger: “We prefer our own thoughts to those of the Bible. We no longer read the Bible seriously. We read it no longer against ourselves but only for ourselves.” The issue here, he suggests, is less a matter of how one actually handles the text than one’s disposition in approaching it. Those who read for themselves are “the knowledgeable,” those who already know what the text will bring, while those who hold open the possibility of reading against themselves approach the text as “the starving ones, the waiting ones, as the needy, the hopeful.”

This, for Bonhoeffer, is the hermeneutical activity of faith. Because the church reads in a space constituted by the address of the Risen One, its reading practices hold open the possibility that the text might confront, challenge, and change the reading community. This is Bonhoeffer’s key hermeneutical insight. If Webster’s key insight regards the centrality of interpretive posture, Bonhoeffer presses this one step further by showing how the church, when it embodies this posture, can read Scripture against itself.

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80 Ibid., 377. Bonhoeffer uses the notion of starvation rhetorically. In this same address he proceeds to mention the masses of people around the world who are literally starving and to suggest that the church’s inability to read against itself, in part, prevents it from caring for such people.
More than a technical skill, this is an embodied and enacted scriptural sensibility. Bonhoeffer seeks to instill this form of reading in his students. Faced with the weekly task of addressing the congregation, the preacher is inevitably tempted to make the text relevant by “contemporizing the text,” i.e., justifying it before the tribunal of the present.\(^{81}\) Two assumptions underlie this temptation: that the text remains inert and useless unless actualized by interpretive agency and that the Archimedean point of interpretation has already been fixed by means of what Bonhoeffer calls reason, culture, and \textit{Volkstum}. The danger hidden within such a hermeneutical disposition is that the interpreter, precisely because of presumed mastery over the text, becomes the agent of the text’s voice. When I seek to justify the text to the present, Bonhoeffer claims, “the principle of contemporizing \textit{resides} within me, in the interpreter...I am the subject of contemporizing...In other words, truth is already fixed before I even begin my exegesis of Scripture.”\(^{82}\) When one succumbs to this temptation, one inevitably finds a suitable and usable text, on that has already been tamed by pre-conceived interpretive interest. Hermeneutical practices that aim at contemporizing the text threaten to reduce the God encountered therein to what Bonhoeffer elsewhere calls a divine \textit{Doppelgänger}.\(^{83}\) Such a God becomes the interpreter’s puppet. In one of his most vivid metaphors Bonhoeffer writes that the one who reads the text from a position of mastery inevitably “trims and prunes [Scripture] until it fits the fixed framework, until the eagle can no longer rise…and is instead put on display with clipped wings…among other domesticated pets.”\(^{84}\) In contrast, he jarringly suggests that

\(^{81}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 413-433.
\(^{82}\) Ibid., 419-20.
\(^{83}\) Ibid., 169.
\(^{84}\) Ibid., 414.
within Scripture we ought to find a place utterly repugnant and alien to us, a place that destabilizes our interpretive sensibilities by reorienting our interpretive agenda around the Risen One.\textsuperscript{85}

Bonhoeffer’s social context at the early stages of Nazism uniquely alerted him to this danger. “This contemporizing of the Christian message leads directly to paganism,” he writes.\textsuperscript{86} If we lose the ability to read Scripture against ourselves, Bonhoeffer warned, we end up re-making a God in the \textit{imago hominis}. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, the turn toward a voice other than God’s and the desire to be like God go hand in hand. Following Luther, Bonhoeffer refers to this as the \textit{cor curvum in se}.\textsuperscript{87} Stuck within itself, the ego remains closed to a word that might approach externally. Feeling it must produce rather than receive, reading is no longer an activity of faith. When this happens, reading no longer remains alert to its ongoing need for grace—for the self is the presumed anchor of interpretation—and no longer has any leverage for hope—for results are already guaranteed in advance.

\textit{Practices of Un-Mastery}

The hermeneutical vision that has emerged to this point possesses a certain theological tidiness. As conceptualities, the theological building blocks used to depict hermeneutical space within the \textit{creatura verbi} fit together nicely. The danger, however, is that we confuse theological coherence for pastoral effectiveness. The ideas of “interpretive posture,” the “activity of faith,” and “reading against oneself” easily become mere verbal decorations that adorn our pre-existing reading

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 167-8.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 415.

\textsuperscript{87} See Bonhoeffer, DBWE 3, 103-114.
practices. When this happens, they have become empty and abstract; though theologically interesting, they become hermeneutically vacuous.

Bonhoeffer was especially sensitive to this threat. Throughout his career he doggedly resists abstraction, recognizing that ideas must be enacted, that if theology is to mean anything, it must fund a form of lived existence. Faithful interpretive posture requires *exercitium*. Interpretive hubris cannot be tempered by mere good intention, and self-renunciation vis-à-vis the text cannot simply be brought into existence by fiat. Both require intentional activity. Becoming open, expectant, and addressable requires practices of un-mastery that de-center the interpretive subject.

When Bonhoeffer suggests that faithful reading of Scripture requires a *sacrificium intellectus*, this is what he has in mind. He is not promoting an anti-intellectualist interpretive agenda or a willful disregard of readerly rigor. He is instead suggesting that if one hopes to hear God’s voice in the text, one ought to silence one’s own. This requires acknowledging that when one comes to the text, one’s intentions are never pure. A reader is always a site of competing interests. One must acknowledge, as much as possible, the presuppositions, agendas, and goals that one imports to the interpretive task. Such self-awareness will by no means guarantee interpret objectivity, for readers

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89 See Bonhoeffer, DBWE 3, 23 no. 11.


91 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 169.

92 On this, see Bultmann, “How Does God Speak to Us through the Bible?”
necessarily approach the text with preunderstanding. Yet by intentionally naming and de-centering one’s own agenda, one prevents preunderstanding from devolving into damaging prejudices that determine interpretive outcomes before the actual act of reading.

Practices of un-mastery within the hermeneutical space constituted by Christ’s address also require the interpreter to engage in deliberate activity that tempers egocentric desires. Bonhoeffer provides several examples that illustrate what such practices entail: remaining “silent in the domain of the church,” “letting go of oneself,” “bearing the burdens of others,” the “practice of service,” and even the “practice of asceticism.” Such activities constitute the habitus that instantiates Christian esse. Of course, this list could be extended. For Bonhoeffer, however, two particular forms of un-mastery are fundamentally important to reading faithfully as the creatura verbi: confession and prayer.

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93 See Bultmann, “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?” in Existence and Faith. He distinguishes between “prejudiced” readings—which we should seek to avoid if we hope to hear from God in the text—and “preunderstanding”—which, as Gadamer and others suggest, is a necessary feature of the hermeneutical process.

94 Of course, the very otherness of God that calls human action into judgment is also the condition for the unpredictable newness of God’s love and grace. As “other,” God both judges and saves. Recognizing the different forms of God’s interpretive presence helps us see that egocentrism is not the primary (or even most significant) form of sin. In recent decades, feminist theology has unmasked the inadequacies of a one-dimensional account of sin as pride. See, e.g., Judith Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace: Women’s Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980) and Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing,” in Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 3-39. In other words, sin manifests itself both as the will to power and in the unwillingness or inability to exert power or to let others do so. This is not to blame the victim for his or her passivity. But it is to suggest that a complete account of sin’s hermeneutical implications requires a more balanced account of sin’s social forms. As Rosemary Radford Reuther claims, “Sin has to be seen both in the capacity to set up proud, antagonistic relations to others and in the passivity of men and women who acquiesce to the group ego” (Secrecy and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 164). This latter point is especially relevant. One of the ways sin thwarts the interpretive process is through buttressing “group ego,” thereby generating a hermeneutical echo chamber. Thus the process by which the powerless acquire power is part and parcel with the process by which the community comes to receive a fresh word from God. Said differently, the notions of un-mastery and decentering for which I have been advocating in this chapter provide space for those who may not otherwise have a voice, thereby allowing the formerly powerless and voiceless to contribute to the hermeneutical process. I consider the communal nature of this process in more depth in chapters 5 and 6.

95 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 12, 232.
The former is central to the logic of displacing the ego. “Confession in the presence of another believer is the most profound kind of humiliation…it deals a terrible blow to one’s pride.”96 If pride, the desire to be sicut deus, is fundamentally an act of turning away from God in order to become the source of one’s own knowledge, then a confessional blow to pride paves the way for becoming attentive to the divine voice. The latter, prayer, is the concrete enactment of neediness and the invitation of Christ’s presence. “Every attempt at pneumatological interpretation is a prayer; a plea for the Holy Spirit, who alone determines...hearing and understanding.”97 In short, by means of confession, prayer, and other practices, the reader tempers interpretive pride and de-centers the interpretive ego, thereby leaving space for the word that only God can bring. As an activity of faith, reading within the creatura verbi is an activity buttressed by practices of un-mastery.

Some may rightly worry that Bonhoeffer’s account of practical receptivity looks like mysticism. This is a valid concern, for both an inflated ecclesiology (against which Webster reacts) and an inflated account of spiritual experience risk objectifying God’s speech in the form of a human quantity. Perhaps this partly explains Webster’s reluctance to follow Bonhoeffer’s inclinations toward concretion. This danger becomes especially clear when Bonhoeffer’s thinking becomes most tangible—during his time at Finkenwalde training and forming students for ministry in the Confessing Church. It is during this stage in his career that outsiders criticize his pastoral vision for becoming overly monastic and hyper-spiritualized.


Yet Bonhoeffer takes care to distinguish his account of biblical interpretation from spiritual ecstasy or enthusiastic rapture. We indeed wait for God’s speech within the congregation, he writes in a letter to a skeptical friend, yet “I enter such a meeting not as one would a Quaker meeting, where I basically would have to await new guidance from the Holy Spirit, but rather as one would enter a battlefield where the word of God is in conflict with all sorts of human opinions.”98 This conflict, he continues, presses the church to Scripture, where God’s Spirit fights and where God’s word can be concretely located. We need not mystically wait for the coming of God’s word, for it is already present when we approach the church’s text. The antidote to spiritualism, Bonhoeffer simply suggests, is the act of engaging the text itself and doing so, he quickly adds, “with an open confession of one’s errors.”99 Following Bonhoeffer, we see that a hermeneutical posture predicated on “listening for the word” and enacted via practices of un-mastery such as prayer and confession pressures the interpreter concretely toward the very words of Scripture. As he elsewhere claims, the prayer kneeler and the study desk must not be separated.100

**Reading the Text: A Hermeneutic of “The Child”**

But what does one actually do at the study desk if one hopes to hear God’s voice? How does one embody a posture of faith in the act of reading itself? In contrast to interpretive methods that seek to make the text relevant, Bonhoeffer’s belief in the Holy Spirit’s power to contemporize the text leads to a very simple methodological claims: “Once we have recognized that [faithful reading]

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98 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 132.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid., 516.
means getting to the substance and allowing the substance to come to expression, the corresponding methodology…must essentially be exegesis.” 

Because the Spirit is the agent who gives the text present significance, human interpretive activity within the *creatura verbi* is freed from bearing a burden beyond its capacity. Thus, for example, Bonhoeffer downplays the need to conclude our exegesis with “concrete application” so as to make it meaningful to the audience; he likewise insists that the preacher should not choose “preferred passages” as a means of preemptsing the Spirit’s presence. Instead, the interpreter must simply attempt to make the whole of Scripture audible as a witness to God’s activity in Christ.

Webster helps us see what such a practice entails. Within the *creatura verbi*, “Exegetical reasoning is, most simply, reading the Bible, the intelligent (and therefore spiritual) act of following the word of the text” and “and attending to its linguistic detail.” Faithful interpretation is a matter of moving ever more deeply into the text itself, guided by the simple conviction that this is where God addresses the church. For sure, no method can guarantee that moving into the text will produce such ends. It could end, as it often does, in silence. Such is the nature of reading in relationship to a living God. Moreover, because God speaks freely, we need not theorize in advance how this patient activity of tracing the text will become theologically or spiritually significant. Such significance is always a gift.

But within hermeneutical space constituted by Christ’s address, we expect that in order for exegesis to be the means of this gift, it should be bracketed by a particular spiritual disposition.

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101 Ibid., 418, emphasis original. The word “exegesis” is underlined twice in Bonhoeffer’s manuscript.
102 Ibid., 422.
103 Webster, *The Domain of the Word*. 130, 77.
According to Bonhoeffer, for example, reading Scripture is not merely a technical skill that can be learned, but something that correlates to one’s spiritual condition.\(^{104}\) Or as Webster suggests, interpretive skills are properly exercised in a “spiritual and ecclesial culture of interpretation by which the regenerate mind is formed, checked and directed.”\(^{105}\)

Put differently, the critical distinction between Christ and his church characteristic of the \textit{creatura verbi} carries a significant performative outcome: it reminds the church that it cannot produce what only God can give. As the creature of the word, the church is compelled to acknowledge its exegetical inadequacy. The church’s reading practices are built upon the acknowledgment of what it \textit{cannot do}. For Bonhoeffer, this acknowledgement proves profoundly liberating. Within the church as the \textit{creatura verbi}, exegesis must abandon from the beginning the task of uncovering God’s word. When reading Scripture within the hermeneutical space constituted by Christ’s address, the interpreter’s primary goal is not to extract meaning from the text or to dig behind it looking for hidden insights. Bonhoeffer suggests that such activity is merely the hermeneutical corollary of Adam and Eve’s sinful activity in the garden.\(^{106}\) Only God speaks God’s word. The exegete is thereby freed to read from the posture of faith, trusting that her job is simply to listen carefully to the words as they come to the church on the pages of Scripture. In an almost paradoxical way, confessing one’s inability and inadequacy vis-à-vis the exegetical task actually compels the interpreter to immerse herself in the text with childlike eagerness.\(^{107}\) When faith, not anxiety, drives the exegetical process, reading is marked more by hopeful patience than by cleverness or technique.

\(^{104}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 5, 64.

\(^{105}\) Webster, \textit{The Domain of the Word}. 63.

\(^{106}\) See Bonhoeffer, DBWE 3, 103-114.

\(^{107}\) On the importance of “the child” in Bonhoeffer, see DBWE 2, 157-161.
Such eagerness issues in the seemingly naïve practice of “reading the text word for word like a child.” Of course, this does not negate the need to engage the tools of critical study. As an activity of faith, interpretation is freed to engage such practices. The key remains the posture out of which one employs critical tools. To reiterate a commonsensical, though underappreciated point, the type of reader that one is, more so than the skills one possess, determines the faithfulness of interpretive activity. As even Wellhausen could quip, reading is not a matter of the spectacles but the eyes.

When framed within the hermeneutical disposition I have been sketching in this chapter, critical inquiry helpfully establishes distance between text and interpreter and thereby helps sustain the “againstness” of the text for which Bonhoeffer advocates. The key here, as Bonhoeffer recognized at an early age, is that critical methods not be overburdened. Practiced within the *creatura verbi*, critical study of the Bible will be unable to overstep its bounds by methodologically determining the interpretive enterprise. The methodologically low-key exegetical activity for which Webster and Bonhoeffer advocate aims simply to show the text for what it is. Critical textual tools will be helpful for letting the text speak as a text, even as certain modes of critical inquiry (e.g., reconstructing the history behind the text or breaking the text into redactional layers) may at times lie beyond the scope of exegetical interest. In other words, critical tools help the reader sense the otherness of the text’s final form. Such tools are good servants but bad masters. Reading Scripture

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108 According to the notes of Erich Klapproth, one of Bonhoeffer’s students at Berlin, Bonhoeffer began the lecture series with this claim. See de Gruchy, “Editor’s Introduction,” in DBWE 3, 23 no. 11.

109 Quoted in John Barton, *Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 59 no. 65. Gadamer gets at something similar when he suggests that the temporal and cultural distance that critical study fosters is a useful component of the understanding process, but this is only so if the interpreter cultivates a “hermeneutically trained” awareness that remains “sensitive to the text’s alterity” and thereby allows the text to reshape her own conceptions; see *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 269.
critically and carefully as a human text is a necessary first step toward hearing divine speech in and through it. Emerging from the critical moment, the reader sees the whole text in new light and may thereby become receptive to God’s voice therein.
Chapter 2: Bonhoeffer and a Hermeneutic of Discipleship

In chapter 1, Bonhoeffer and Webster offered mutually reinforcing visions. Webster more explicitly prioritizes God’s eternal being as the foundation of the church, while Bonhoeffer more readily directs attention to the nature of concrete existence within it; yet both offer a Christological account of ecclesial space that maintains an asymmetrical unity between Christ and his people. Within this space, the church engages in reading as an activity of faith that emerges from a hermeneutical posture of receptivity.

Having followed their lead to this juncture, I now tease out their differences. I suggest that Bonhoeffer helps us overcome a certain hermeneutical danger that continues to lurk within Webster’s theology of the word. Webster may avoid the charge of passivity by upholding a form of hermeneutical agency asymmetrically related to Christ’s, but this agency, though theoretically actual, lacks shape and substance. While Webster has succeeded in articulating a form of ecclesial visibility—“spiritual visibility,” as he calls it—he nevertheless offers a strikingly invisible—or at least immaterial—account of reading. Though he rightly notes the eccentricity of the church’s hermeneutical posture, his construal of this posture lacks thickness and thus lacks a concrete account of the practices that might form and sustain it.

The Threat of Hermeneutical Spiritualism

I suggest that a denser depiction of reading is necessary. To paraphrase Leonardo Boff, readers of Scripture do not live in the clouds. We might add the obvious: the very process of reading is material through and through; our access to the text, our access to literacy, the time we dispose to the act of reading, the bodies around which we gather as we read, and the ends for which we read
are all shaped by a complex interplay of social, political, and economic factors. Whenever we read a text, we are doing more than just reading. Accordingly, the posture in which we approach the text is more than just mental—it is always, whether we admit it or not, bound up in a complex nexus of forces and subject to numerous ambient influences. This does not mean that we make theological articulation a slave to purely historicist or empiricist articulation. Webster’s theological vision remains foundational, and we must continue to be robustly theological. But it is necessary to supplement the account of hermeneutical space with a thicker vision that more accurately attends to the multidimensional process by which understanding emerges from a written text that witnesses to a living God. As I suggest below, Bonhoeffer’s notion of discipleship moves us in this direction. Within the creatura verbi, the hermeneutical activity of faith is the activity of discipleship.

**Cognitive “Space”**

The danger lurking within the theology of reading that has emerged to this point is that even in affirming that the church’s hermeneutical space is a real, creaturely space, it remains a “space” in only a loosely figurative sense. Darren Sarisky exemplifies this tendency in his recent work on theological interpretation by implying that hermeneutical space is merely a matter of text and reader, not a space in any normal sense of the word.\(^1\) In fact, he explicitly speaks of this space as a “metaphorical notion.”\(^2\) The church becomes more like an ideational field than a matter of spatial extension. The “space” of reading becomes something that fits within the mind. While Sarisky follows Webster’s lead in articulating a theological account of hermeneutical activity, the vision of

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\(^1\) Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 158.

\(^2\) Ibid., 2. Sarisky, one of Webster’s students, refers to “hermeneutical space” on analogy to Charles Taylor’s conception of “moral space” in *Sources of the Self*. 
reading that emerges risks vacating the hermeneutical activity of its material dimensions. Having fought for a form of ecclesiological visibility, we are tempted to lose nerve by imagining the hermeneutical enterprise in invisible (even if fully creaturely) terms.

The mistake, in other words, is to confuse the church’s “visibility” with its “creatureliness.” To affirm the latter is not the same as affirming the former. This confusion reduces the meaning of visibility by opening the door to a form of activity that, although theoretically creaturely, lacks bodily, spatial, and material dimensions—an activity that though “visible” cannot be seen because it remains hidden within the mind. Having fought for a theory of ecclesial visibility that avoids conflating divine and creaturely realities, we may nevertheless settle for an ecclesiology without materiality. Left unchecked, this tendency pressures toward a form of hermeneutical spiritualism—a depiction of the interpretive enterprise that avoids the charge of passivity and yet fails to account for the material and human process by which the church seeks understanding through the text. This reduction takes concrete form as an emphasis on cognition at the expense of corporeality. One is led, consequently, to imagine an overly intellectualist account of hermeneutical faithfulness.

The danger here is not simply that we minimize the humanity of the text itself, sometimes referred to as hermeneutical docetism. This danger is real and must be appreciated. Much theological energy has rightly been devoted to this issue. G. C. Berkouwer tackles this issue with special vigor in his *Holy Scripture*, as does Webster, though less extensively, in his work of the same title. This is well and good. But I am suggesting we distinguish textual docetism (i.e., a less than fully human text) from hermeneutical spiritualism (i.e., a hermeneutic that underplays the humanity and materiality of the process of ascertaining meaning in and through the text). We have rightly learned to uphold the full humanity of the text; we have even learned to accept historical criticism as an interpretive corollary of textual ontology. We must also uphold the full humanity of the reading process itself.
The tendency toward hermeneutical spiritualism is apparent in Webster, for even as he attempts to resist the slide toward an idealist or invisible ecclesiology, he nevertheless construes the church’s hermeneutical space in predominantly immaterial terms. This is evident in his recent work, for example, when revelation becomes fundamentally “the restoration of the creature’s knowledge” or when the Spirit’s work in interpretation is ordered toward a situation in which “the saints may know.” Skewed toward matters of knowledge, the telos of revelation becomes “cognitive fellowship,” the bestowal of a “new intellectual nature,” and a “regenerate intellect.” Although this vision rightly emphasizes God’s revelatory activity through the Spirit, it risks remaining trapped within a cognitivist framework.

Webster’s emphasis on cognition certainly carries important insights, for the Spirit gifts human beings with a certain form of knowledge as they undergo the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2). Yet this mental transformation is also a physical, material occurrence—a matter of laying one’s body on the altar (Rom. 12:1). To lose sight of the body in our preoccupation with knowledge is to offer an attenuated account of God’s revelatory activity.

*God’s Word and the Incarnation of the Word*

Christology is rarely neutral, for the way one construes the God-man exposes hidden of theological assumptions. I suggest, therefore, that the hermeneutical tendency evident in Webster has analogies in the cluster of Christological heresies that devalue Christ’s body as a site of meaning.

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3 Webster, *The Domain of the Word*, 22, 53, emphasis original.

4 Ibid., 53, 56.

by elevating the significance of the immaterial aspects of existence. I suggest, in other words, that Webster’s inclination toward the disembodied and cognitivist elements of hermeneutical faithfulness owes, at least in part, to a deeper Christological tendency.

This Christological penchant becomes clear in Webster’s recent engagement with John Owen. After acknowledging Owen’s belief that Christian faith ultimately “depends on, and is resolved into, invisible things,” he writes,

If this is so, then the matter of revelation…is not simply identical with the form or medium of revelation…Revelation is not an historical quantity _tout court_, even—especially—in the hypostatic union and the Son’s temporal exercise of his offices. There is, of course, historical form which theological reflection may not pass over; but that form has not only an unforgettable density but also a finality, and therefore an instrumental character, such that spiritual intelligence may not terminate there. Revelation beckons theological intelligence to consider the cause of revelation, and to receive it as an embassy of that which cannot be resolved into or exhausted by historical manifestation. Each act and word of the incarnate one has force only because he has come down.\(^6\)

On the one hand, we can read this passage as simply reproducing the Reformed tendency to maintain the word’s freedom in the incarnational union. In itself this is not objectionable; as within ecclesiology, we are dealing with a unity-in-distinction. Yet when Jesus’ historical form becomes merely instrumental, as Webster suggests, we rightly wonder if balance has been lost. If the historicity of the man from Nazareth is a stepping-stone for intellectual ascent, it is easy to see why hermeneutical faithfulness becomes an immaterial affair. Within this vision, the hermeneutical enterprise becomes a matter of transcending the materiality of our existence as we strive for invisible things. I am suggesting, therefore, that we can draw a connection between strongly Antiochene Christological tendencies and an immaterial account of ecclesial space—particularly the hermeneutical enterprise within it.

\(^6\) Webster, _God Without Measure_, Vol. 1, 6.
With this in mind, Rowan Williams’ critique of the early Barth continues to hold relevance. Williams worries that Barth’s theological imagination is hamstrung by a preoccupation with knowledge and that this plays out Christologically in an undue emphasis on the *extra calvinisticum*.\(^7\) The presupposition that conditions Barth’s early theological work, Williams suggests, is that an “epistemological gulf” separates divine and created being.\(^8\) Animated by this worry, Barth construes the incarnation as an epistemological bridge, a means by which God delivers knowledge from one side of the gulf to the other. When this happens, Jesus’ flesh functions as a “concealing exterior vehicle”; it becomes the medium by which the word achieves its revelatory goals without sacrificing its divinity.\(^9\) Elsewhere Williams refers to this epistemologically conditioned account of the incarnation as a “sophisticated technique for ensuring that such non-worldly truth is accurately communicated.”\(^10\)

As he rightly notes, when viewed within an epistemic paradigm, the flesh of Jesus, his human history as the man from Nazareth, remains extrinsic to divine revelation. At best, his materiality becomes a matter of ancillary significance, something to be surpassed and set aside on the cognitive quest for an immaterial essence.

It is certainly true that God is a communicative agent and that speech is essential to God’s eternal being. And it is true, as we have seen, that placing priority on God’s agency as the speaker helps safeguard God’s freedom from historical forces. Yet we should pause to consider the nature of God’s word more carefully, for God’s speech is “verbal” in a very particular sense. Taking the

\(^7\) Rowan Williams, “Barth and the Trinity,” in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 112.

\(^8\) Ibid., 127.

\(^9\) Ibid.

incarnation seriously, we see that God speaks a life: “In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb. 1:2). This Son is not a glorified angel, God’s most trusted courier—the Son is God’s speech. The medium is the message. Verbum and carnes belong together. If we sever this relationship by making the latter a “concealing exterior vehicle,” we reductively distort our doctrine of God. The revealing God becomes essentially a speaker, a vocal being.  

Bonhoeffer was alert to this temptation. He observes, for example, that emphasizing God’s free speech “runs the risk of neglecting the historicity of Jesus.” When this happens, we are subsequently pressured to reduce the activity faith vis-à-vis the risen Christ to verbal reception, thereby accenting the intellectual and cognitive aspects of ecclesial existence to the neglect of the material and bodily. When the word that creates the church is reduced to a mere verbal entity, lacking historical and fleshly dimensions, the successful hermeneutical endeavor is likewise reduced to an upward climb toward invisible things.

Webster occasionally speaks of non-mental aspects of hermeneutical faithfulness. He speaks, for example, of the importance of Christian fellowship in the reading process. I am suggesting, however, that within his account of Christian practices, Christian bodies remain conspicuously absent, while the Christian mind receives unusual attention. Nous rises over soma. Whether this tendency has direct provenance in Christological shortcomings is, of course, quite difficult to say. I would venture to suggest, however, that the nature of Webster’s Christological vision and the

11 Certainly, a more nuanced account of God’s speech-acts would helpfully alleviate some of this onesidedness. See, e.g., Kevin J. Vanhoozer, The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 63-68 and Richard S. Briggs, Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation (Edinburgh; T&T Clark, 2001). However, even within the framework of a more theologically robust account of speech-act theory, we must confront the tendency to construe God’s “acts” as primarily mental or linguistic in nature.

12 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 9, 441.

13 However, when this becomes “communicative fellowship” that aims at the “sanctification of the human knower,” one wonders what sort of visibility this might entail; see Webster, Holy Scripture, 70-71.
absence of bodies in his theological reflection coincide to such a degree that considering the relationship might bear constructive fruit. Yet regardless of how we diagnose this particular issue in Webster, I suggest that directing attention to the fleshliness of God’s *verbum* helps allay the disembodied hermeneutical tendencies especially prevalent within theologies that consider the church to be the *creatura verbi*.

*The Church’s Christological Visibility*

Bonhoeffer again comes to our aid by insisting upon the interrelation of one’s Christological imagination and one’s account of ecclesial space. He contends that the church takes up space on earth because the incarnation takes up space on earth.14 This is why “any attack on the assertion ‘Christ came in the flesh’ [I John 4] abolishes the church.”15 In this sense, the church’s visibility is not, most properly, a spiritual visibility but a *Christological visibility*—the earthly-historical form of Christ’s ongoing existence.

This is not to say that the church is a continuation or extension of the incarnation; rather, the church is a uniquely visible and historical community called into existence by Jesus’ own ongoing historical activity. We are not here resorting to naturalistic conceptions of sociality; the church and its visibility remain dependent on grace. Webster is right to the extent that the church’s existence is a spiritual event, as Pentecost makes clear. But it is *Christ* who sends the Spirit, such that the

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14 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 225ff. Bonhoeffer calls for a church that claims physical space, not only for its worship but also for the daily life of its members. “That is why we must now speak of the *living space* [Lebensraum] of the visible church-community” (DBWE 4, 232). As Geffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey note, Bonhoeffer’s index to the 1937 edition of *Nachfolge* refers to this notion of living space under the subject “Incarnation” (DBWE 4, 232 no. 36). This testifies to the close link between the incarnation and ecclesial space in Bonhoeffer’s imagination. As he writes elsewhere, the space of the church-community “includes the whole person in all areas of life…The reason for this is to be found in the *incarnation of Jesus Christ*” (DBWE 14, 460).

15 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 461.
community formed thereby takes its bearings from him, their head. As the *creatura verbi*, the community shares in Christ’s visibility.

Bonhoeffer grasps this important distinction when he argues that the church is *visible*, but not *empirically available*.\(^{16}\) Though visibly and materially existing as the Son of God in his continuous human history, Jesus’ divinity was not statically available to any general onlooker. His divinity, though inseparable from his human flesh, could not be read directly from his face. This is not to say that his existence was invisible; rather, it is to say that perception of it is always a gift of the Spirit. In this sense, Jesus was indeed “spiritually visible.” Yet as such he is always a fully material and fleshly being.

Here is the point I am leading to: in speaking of the nature of the church’s visibility, or lack thereof, we are speaking about the nature of humanity’s epistemic relationship to it. In a specifically theological sense, knowledge is power. The undialectical availability of grace would put creatures in a position to control it rather than receive it. Because the church is continually needy, human knowers cannot pin down grace in empirical terms.\(^{17}\) The issue it not materiality or visibility *per se* but an uncriticized equation of God’s activity with it. Bonhoeffer’s ability to uphold visibility while denying empirical availability holds open this critical distinction, affirms the community’s ongoing need for grace, and prevents the community from assuming that a particular visible manifestation of the church stands as a full expression of God’s will.

When our imaginations are tutored by an incarnational account of Christ’s historical existence, we see how ecclesial visibility is both a spiritual and Christological reality. It is spiritual,

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\(^{16}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 63.

\(^{17}\) On this, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 726.
because the critical gap between Christ and his community prevents human knowers from undialectically equating their knowledge of the church’s material structures with God’s free grace. Yet it is Christological in the sense that it only and always lives in history as a material reality that takes up space like the incarnate one himself. Even if the visibility of Christ’s work in the church remains hidden to onlookers (whether from inside or outside the community), this work takes shape in history as a materially visible community. This carries implications for our conception of the church as a hermeneutical space. Within the space constituted by Christ’s address, the activity of faith has spatial and material dimensions, a matter of the body as well as the mind.

Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension: Christology and the Space of Discipleship

One of the reasons Bonhoeffer is helpful at this point is the seriousness with which he takes the Synoptic Gospels as depictions of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. The word that God speaks, and hence the word that creates the church, is the man the Gospels depict. While this claim may sound so simple as to warrant little consideration, it is telling that Webster’s work abounds with Pauline theology and the occasional reference to John, but leaves Matthew, Mark, and Luke conspicuously under represented. When the Synoptic Jesus does show up, emphasis falls on his “communicative initiative” as the Risen One (e.g., Mt. 28).18 Webster helpfully draws from Paul as a means of accenting Jesus’ resurrected agency. But disconnected from Jesus’ historical life, I argue that this remains a thin depiction of his agency. Thus one danger of construing the church as the *creatura verbi* is that we imply a word without flesh.

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18 See, e.g., Webster, *The Domain of the Word*. 35.
For Webster, when God calls people to himself through Scripture, the accent falls on the arousal and reconstitution of human intelligence and on the generation of knowledge. For Bonhoeffer, in contrast, the accent falls on embodiment: “The aim and objective is not to renew human thoughts about God so that they are correct…but that we, with our whole existence and as living creatures, are the image of God.” Christ’s speech in and through the text shapes not only knowledge but also being, how we think and also how we are. As he writes elsewhere, when Christ speaks he “is always aiming at one thing, namely, to bind human beings to himself.” Christ calls creatures into a way of life together with him, and while knowledge will surely accrue along the way, the outcome of his call is not merely cognitive. It results in “thick knowledge” predicated upon both concrete patterns of lived existence and intellectual activity. Within the wake of Jesus’ call, a way of knowing and a way of being are inextricably connected.

A consistent commitment to hold incarnation and resurrection together undergirds this conception of revelation, and it plays out in Bonhoeffer’s famous notion of discipleship. For him,

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19 Ibid., ix, 19, 61.
20 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 282-3.
21 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 424, emphasis original.
22 The notion of “thick knowledge” parallels the notion of “thick description” found in Clifford Geertz and others. Drawing from Geertz, George Lindbeck suggests that when attempting to describe a particular aspect of religious language or practice, one cannot isolate the particular from the larger cultural and semiotic framework in which it is embedded. The particular must be understood “thickly,” that is, within the context of the whole culture of which it is a part (see Nature of Doctrine, 115). On analogy to the notion of thick description, I use the phrase “thick knowledge” to denote the sense in which one’s understanding of God cannot be abstracted from the larger framework that makes this knowledge possible, i.e., the life of discipleship itself. Unlike Lindbeck, I am not primarily concerned with the process of understanding theological language or practice as a second order discipline. Rather, I am making an epistemological suggestion, a claim about the very nature of the disciple’s own knowledge of the Lord. The disciple’s way of knowing indeed has relevance for the task of describing and disseminating this knowledge, but my main point here is that the knowledge itself is bound up in practice and embodiment, in a way of life. As Kavin Rowe suggests, thick knowledge is “a lived way of knowing…indissolubly tied to a set of practices” that constitute a concrete pattern of communal life that publicly instantiates the good news of Christ (World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6).
discipleship is not just one metaphor among others; it is an overarching motif that serves as the framework for Christian life and thought. This will prove significant for my argument in the remainder of this project, for the call that constitutes the church as the *creatura verbi* is the call to discipleship, the call to follow after Jesus. As Bonhoeffer writes, the only explanation for the existence of the church is that “Jesus himself calls” and that “the disciple walks behind Jesus.”

All ecclesial activity takes shape within the space of this walking. Indeed, the very possibility of ecclesial existence is predicated upon the out-ahead-ness of the Risen One. “God does not allow us to walk a path that he has not walked before and on which he would not precede us.”

More clearly than the English “discipleship,” the German *Nachfolge* conveys a sense of *following after* the one who is “walking ahead of me, step by step.” Barth captures Bonhoeffer’s insight when he notes that the risen Jesus is not indolently resting in place but “strides through the ages still left to the world.” This striding, and the calling that accompanies it, gives the church its space. As Bonhoeffer writes from prison, Christian life consists of being continually propelled into walking Jesus’ path. Discipleship thus involves journeying with the risen Lord, which requires the church to continually seek his presence, imitate his action, and witness to his ongoing activity in the world.

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23 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 57, 58.


25 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 176.

26 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2, 663.

Bonhoeffer’s discipleship motif allows him to relate incarnation and resurrection within one Christological vision. In fact, this is one of his main theological goals in *Discipleship*, which he achieves by unifying the Synoptic Jesus (incarnation) with the Pauline Christ (resurrection). Many English translations obscure this point. Whereas the original German edition divides the book into two parts—one that engages the Synoptic Jesus and the other the Pauline Christ—English translations often divide Part One into three chapters and reduce Part Two to the fourth and final chapter, thereby rendering the resurrection a mere addendum to the more primary task of analyzing the Synoptic Jesus. When we recognize his original structure, however, we see that “Bonhoeffer’s book…intended to confirm that the call by the earthly Jesus to follow him continues unbroken in and through the church-community, from the days of Paul and the apostles to the present.”

In other words, Bonhoeffer aims in *Discipleship* to hold incarnation and resurrection together, thereby offering an account of “following after” that carries contemporary relevance for the church. Of course, the discipleship motif is most obviously on display in the Gospels. As Bonhoeffer writes, in these texts “the concept of discipleship can express almost the full breadth and content of relations between the disciple and Jesus Christ.” And he admits, “In the Pauline texts, however, this concept recedes almost completely into the background. Paul’s primary concern is not to proclaim the story of the Lord’s earthly life to us, but rather his presence as the risen and glorified Lord.”


30 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 205.

31 Ibid.
It would seem, then, that attention to the resurrection would diminish the significance of Jesus’ call to discipleship. Bonhoeffer recognizes that many readers will reason in this way: “To his first disciples Jesus was bodily present, speaking his word directly to them. But this Jesus died and is risen...Jesus no longer walks past me in bodily form and calls, ‘Follow me,’ as he did to Levi.”

Bonhoeffer responds by noting that this line of reasoning, though common, threatens to bifurcate the unity of Jesus and thereby place the church outside of Christ’s living presence. “All of these questions refuse to take seriously that Jesus Christ is not dead but alive...He is present with us today, in bodily form and with his word.” Consequently, one of his overarching goals in *Discipleship* is to incorporate Paul’s new and unique insights into an overarching account of Christ’s relationship to his followers. “Paul, albeit with a new terminology, adopts and further develops the concept of discipleship.”

Though in *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer rarely engages in explicit discussion with dialogue partners, certain individuals stand in the background. Bultmann is perhaps the most prominent. While Bultmann (as Bonhoeffer reads him) separates the earthly Jesus from the resurrected Christ, referring to the former as the “prehistory” for the church’s kerygma, Bonhoeffer allows for no mode of Christ’s risen existence that differs from that of the Synoptic Jesus. Bultmann’s move,
Bonhoeffer believes, not only destroys the unity of Scripture, it turns Jesus into a theological principle, such that he is no longer the embodied Lord. Though Webster and Bultmann obviously differ in many respects, the theology of the word present in both thinkers tends toward the same Christological outcome: an emphasis on the resurrected Pauline Christ and a concomitant devaluation of the incarnation.

In response to this tendency Bonhoeffer boldly proclaims—and this gets to the very heart of his constructive vision in *Discipleship*—that the whole of Scripture “testifies to the ongoing presence of the synoptic Jesus Christ.”[^36] “The life of Jesus Christ here on earth has not yet concluded,”[^37] he continues, which is why “as the Crucified and Risen One, Jesus is at the same time the Christ who is present now.”[^38]

The ongoing nature of Jesus’ historical existence is one of the most unique features of Christology within the discipleship motif. Those concerned with “Christology” as a theological locus normally begin their exploration by looking to the incarnation, to that event in the past in which the natures were united in one person. Traditional Christology therefore tends to speak of Jesus’ history as those years between his birth in Bethlehem and death outside Jerusalem. These years, as the reasoning goes, display the meaning and effects of the incarnational union. On these accounts, the ascended Christ indeed continues to live freely, but his ascended actions are often limited to the epistemological realm—he makes known what happened in those thirty years that constitute his

[^36]: Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 206.
[^37]: Ibid., 286.
[^38]: Bonhoeffer, DBWE 12, 310.
history as the incarnate one.\textsuperscript{39} There is a sense, in other words, that one must distinguish Christ’s historical existence from his ascended existence. One determines his identity; the other proclaims it.

Bonhoeffer, however, begins Christological reflection in a very different place—by looking to the \textit{Christus praesens}. It is the one we encounter concretely today, not the Jesus of history, the Christ of church doctrine, or even the Christ embodied socially that stands as the proper object of theological reflection. “Christology asks not about what Christ \textit{has done} but rather who Christ \textit{is}.”\textsuperscript{40} Even though the earthly body of Jesus of Nazareth has ascended into heaven, he remains the incarnate Lord; sitting at the Father’s right hand does not entail a reversal of the \textit{becoming} of John 1:14, nor does it entail the end of Jesus’ historicity. To be sure, Bonhoeffer would agree with Webster that through the Spirit the risen Christ is free from temporal and spatial circumscription and able to present himself to all times and places.\textsuperscript{41} Yet even so, Jesus never ceases to be singularly particular, to be \textit{this} man and no other. He remains the “absolutely unique, historic one.”\textsuperscript{42} It thus becomes evident that a specific Christology underlies the discipleship motif. To be sure, it remains robustly Chalcedonian, though it offers a particular rendition of the tradition. It affirms the full humanity and divinity of Jesus but insists that these are not static substances that somehow cohere within the person. The two are united not spatially but historically, in a life.\textsuperscript{43} Because Jesus’

\textsuperscript{39} On this, see J. Patrick Dunn, “The Presence of the Ascended: History and Incarnation in Barth and Bonhoeffer,” (paper presented at the 2016 International Bonhoeffer Congress, Basel, Switzerland).

\textsuperscript{40} Bonhoeffer, DBWE 12, 310, emphasis added. He continues, “As the Crucified and Risen One, Jesus is at the same time the Christ who is present now.”

\textsuperscript{41} Webster, \textit{The Domain of the Word}, 42. This calls to mind the important role of the Holy Spirit. For more on this, see pp. 66-68 below.

\textsuperscript{42} Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 424.

\textsuperscript{43} Bonhoeffer points toward something similar when he prioritizes the “Who?” question over the “How?” question in his Christology lectures delivered at Berlin. See DBWE 12, 304.
humanity and divinity are not static features of his person but dynamic qualities that cohere in a life, he exists as the God-man precisely as he continues to live a history that unites these two natures.

This carries important ecclesiological implications. Just as Jesus’ humanity and divinity are active, the church’s participation in him must be active as well. In this way, the ongoing life of the man from Nazareth creates the space of the church. Christians live “in Christ,” then, not in that they participate in the substances he assumed but to the extent that their histories take shape within the arena of his ongoing life. To be “in Christ,” in other words, is to participate in his movement in history, to walk the path of discipleship.44

Of course, much more could be said about the Christology that underlies Bonhoeffer’s discipleship motif, and a full treatment obviously exceeds the limits of this project. Here in Part One I gesture toward some its defining features because it resources the hermeneutical task that I articulate in this project. The main point to note for now is that by unifying Paul with the Synoptics, Bonhoeffer succeeds at construing Jesus’ ongoing resurrected existence in thick, spatial terms. Because Jesus is not just an immaterial word or idea, we must think in a concrete and material manner about the modes of his presence. Jesus’ ongoing existence calls forth a social space and an array of practices that become the means by which his followers participate in him. This, of course, has hermeneutical ramifications. As Christopher Rowland reminds us, echoing Bonhoeffer’s central insight, “The fundamental learning experience in the Gospels is not the teaching Jesus gave his disciples but their activity in walking with Jesus on the way to Jerusalem.”45 To learn from the risen

44 See Keith L. Johnson, *Theology as Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 61.

Lord within the hermeneutical space of discipleship is to learn in a holistic and complex way, as one who travels with Jesus as he walks his path.

*God’s Word and the Crucifixion of the Word*

This path leads through the cross. “Where you see the Resurrected, you should also see the Crucified.”46 With this, Bonhoeffer upholds Luther’s hermeneutical axiom—*crux probat omnia*. The cross is “the center and the paradoxical emblem of the Christian message,”47 he writes, which is why one’s reading of Scripture “should drive him to the cross of Christ.”48 In fact, for Bonhoeffer the turn to Scripture “corresponds exactly to the turn… to the cross of Christ.”49 Therefore, if the ecclesiology that emerges in Bonhoeffer is to serve as a hermeneutical space, we must affirm both the *materiality* and the *cruciformity* of the hermeneutical enterprise.

This requires us to think critically about traditional accounts of the *creatura verbi*. Here we can again consider Webster. While I agree that the Risen One speaks to his community with eloquence and radiance, as he forcefully claims,50 I wonder if this accent threatens to miss something of the cross. Whatever else it means that Christ is verbally active, we must affirm that the one who speaks carries the marks of Golgotha. Christ’s is a *cruciform eloquence*. Barth says it well: “Raised from the

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46 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 638.


48 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 519.

49 Ibid., 419.

dead by the power of God, He encounters him in the *despicable and forbidding form* of the Slain and Crucified of Golgotha. Webster deals extensively with Barth’s mature theology as it emerges in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3. In fact, his account of the risen Christ’s verbal activity owes much to Barth’s creative exploration of Christ’s prophetic office. Yet Webster’s reluctance to attend to the cruciform dimensions of Barth’s vision reveals a lacuna in his own, and it thereby alerts us to another distortive possibility lurking with ecclesiologies that prioritize the word. So we ask: what does it imply about the church as a hermeneutical space that the word that creates it is despicable and forbidding, a word with holes in his hands and a scar in his sides?

This account of the *verbum* prevents the hermeneutical triumphalism that can result from a strong emphasis on the resurrection. Such triumphalism often emerges in the form of a robust conception of the *claritas* of Scripture. Over the past decade, Webster has consistently made the doctrine of clarity a point of emphasis in his hermeneutical theology. As a theological concept, it functions to prioritize God’s activity in and through the text. The text is perspicuous not because of some static quality it possesses in and of itself but because God’s word is eloquent, radiating out of the text by virtue of its own “inherent potency.”

The doctrine of clarity certainly holds great value. By placing priority on God the revealer, it helps uphold the hermeneutical implications of the critical distinction that exists between Christ and his people, thereby serving to chasten interpretive efforts and press toward hermeneutical practices of un-mastery. The danger, however, is that an imbalanced conception of scriptural clarity that

51 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 377, emphasis added.


53 Ibid., 40.
foregrounds Christ’s eloquence undermines the practical significance of the asymmetry between Christ and his church. Whereas the asymmetrical nature of the relationship Christ shares with his people should function hermeneutically to press the reading community toward constant repentance, prayer, and other practices of un-mastery, accounts of clarity that remain unchastened by the cross can exaggerate interpretive certainty, thereby vacating this relationship of performative potential. When this happens, the interpretive community situated vis-à-vis the eloquent Christ can employ a conception of clarity to underwrite the God-ordained nature of its knowledge. Having established a critical distinction with one hand, we nevertheless employ a conception of clarity to overcome it with the other. The logic of clarity becomes the logic of control.

But what happens when the doctrine of clarity takes account of the word’s cruciformity? What might it mean for the hermeneutical enterprise that the word of Christ that comes to the church through the textual auxiliary is not only “eloquent and radiant” but also “despicable and forbidding”?

Bonhoeffer points toward an answer when we speaks of a light “that looks like the deepest night.” As he realized, a cruciform theology of the word not only illumines but also disrupts, not only reveals truth but also places the church itself in question. The cross shatters false religious pretensions, revealing humanity’s desire for God’s presence to be a mere façade. Although humanity may claim to want God, they cannot bear God’s presence, so they kill God. As Bonhoeffer starkly puts it, “The Word become human must be hung on the cross by the human logos.”

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54 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 598.
55 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 12, 305.
the disciples’ vision of God and God’s future is shattered, and thus they flee. For them, the cross is disorienting and darkening, an end.

This is not, of course, the end of the story. The crucified word raised form the dead confronts the very ones who fled. He who his followers abandoned issues again the call, “follow me.” This is simultaneously a moment of grace and judgment, both for Jesus’ disciples then and for those called to follow him now. As Bonhoeffer writes, “We ourselves are now the ones who stand convicted.”56 The Christ who passes through the cross and reconvenes his scattered followers is the one whose very presence compels them to acknowledge their failure, even as his presence promises their forgiveness. Gathering around this Jesus entails a process of confession and reorientation. To encounter the word of the Crucified and Risen One is to encounter a moment of grace that is simultaneously an invitation to embark upon the ongoing process of unlearning the sinful patterns and habits of human existence. While the word of the resurrected Christ obviously addresses humanity’s epistemological problem, the word of the crucified Christ addresses a deeper issue—the very sinfulness and brokenness of human existence. The solution to this problem is not a mere address, though it certainly includes that. The solution is to be called into a new way of life following after the Lord—and to be continually given grace anew to walk the path.

A healthy dose of cruciformity thus challenges any lingering presumptions about the immediacy of the revelatory moment. For Bonhoeffer, revelation entails both the moment of grace that puts one on the road with Jesus and the continual return of grace as the disciple is called step by

56 Ibid., 305.
step. In this sense, revelation is not “all at once” but an ongoing fellowship; being a Christian “is not a matter of a moment but takes time.”

Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutical vision grows out of the *theologia crucis*. “We seek the will of God, who is utterly alien and repugnant to us,” he writes, “whose ways are not our ways, and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, the God concealed beneath the sign of the cross, where all our ways and thoughts come to an end.” This account of God reminds us that the hermeneutical lust for immediacy and certainty must confront the reality of Jesus’ crucified body. Precisely because Jesus is present as a crucified agent, the hermeneutical process is marked by elements of silence, watchfulness, and the expectation of judgment. Scriptural clarity, situated in the shadow of the cross, would have more in common with a process of repentance than with a moment of cognition. Unlike readings that seek a revelatory moment of lucidity, the church called into being by the crucified Lord also reads in search of the revelatory moment of crisis, the moment that disrupts one’s normal way of being human by placing one next to crucified Lord. Precisely in this strange form of material visibility, God’s grace unsettles the human knower and judges all attempts at mastery. Precisely because Jesus is the slain one, the encounter with his gracious voice is a challenging event. And precisely because he was slain and raised in the flesh, the encounter with his gracious voice cannot bypass material processes.

Here it becomes clear that the hermeneutic of “againstness” for which Bonhoeffer advocates is a function of both the resurrection and the cross. If a resurrection hermeneutic emphasizes

57 See Bonhoeffer, DBWE 15, 511.
58 Ibid., 517.
59 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 168.
Christ’s living speech and the necessity of a posture of receptivity vis-à-vis his vocal activity, and if an incarnational hermeneutic emphasizes the importance of concretely visible forms of life that follow Jesus on his way, then a cruciform hermeneutic emphasizes the importance of repentance and the correlating ecclesial practices predicated upon the conviction that Christ’s call challenges the human community to new forms of thinking and being. Within the space constituted by the word, the hermeneutical process is simultaneously marked by the spatiality of the incarnation, the potent eloquence of the resurrection, and the chastening silence of the cross.

Webster’s Response: Aseity and Promeity

At this point, Webster might push back:

The person and work of the Son can be so identified with his incarnate presence that his eternal pre-existent deity recedes from view; or the post-existence of the Son in his state of exaltation can come to be retracted. In both, Christology is constricted, as the temporal career of the Son is allowed to expand to fill the whole…As a result, ecclesiology tends to be preoccupied with the question: What kind of continuity is there between the incarnate and the ecclesial body?Webster worries that this tendency is especially evident in certain strands of Bonhoeffer scholarship that claim that God is always God-for-us and God-with-us. The principal danger, Webster suggests, is that an undue emphasis on promeity collapses divine freedom into worldly processes, thereby calling God’s aseity into question. This tendency, he concludes, “surely needs correction by a robust account of the lordly activity of God in Christ.”

61 Webster, God Without Measure Vol. 1, 184.


63 Webster, The Domain of the Word, 128.
Here emerges an important difference of emphasis between Bonhoeffer and Webster. This difference becomes especially evident when the former writes, “I can never think of Jesus Christ in his being-in-himself, but only in his relatedness to me.”\(^6\) Yet it is worth distinguishing Bonhoeffer himself from certain interpretive trends in Bonhoeffer scholarship. Beginning with John Robinson’s *Honest to God*, English language scholarship has been tempted toward superficial readings of Bonhoeffer as a post-Christian or secular theologian who abandons all recourse to God’s objectivity.\(^5\) Webster is right to react critically to these trends. In my estimate, Bonhoeffer would respond similarly, though he would frame his criticism differently.

His discipleship motif has great utility at just this point, for it frees him from the constraints of a purely vertical conception of God’s presence to creation and thereby allows him to articulate God’s sovereignty in a historical register. This is not to say that he ignores classical debates about divine being. Philosophical concerns regarding transcendence-immanence and act-being are prevalent in his dissertations. But as the *Kirchenkampf* developed and his thinking gained concretion, he learned to filter these concerns through an incarnational lens. It is the historicity and personhood of the God-man that allows him to overcome the limits of classical metaphysical geometry and thereby uphold God’s divine freedom without sacrificing Christ’s promeity.

God has fully entered history in Jesus, but God has done so freely, as an act of pure grace. More particularly—and this is where the theme of Nachfolge is so helpful—God enacts this freedom historically. Christ is both “above” his people in eternal freedom and “out-ahead” of them as their

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\(^6\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 12, 314.

living Lord. In the journey of discipleship, Jesus retains priority. The path belongs to him. Even being present, the incarnate Christ lives in utter mobility, exercising his sovereign otherness by means of his utter out-ahead-ness. Therefore, to say that Christ is with us is not to say that we have him under control. Within the discipleship motif, Christ is truly at hand but never in hand. In this sense, Bonhoeffer, with Webster, appreciates the disruptive potential of God’s otherness. Yet, he does so in a way that refuses to downplay the concrete nature of life with Christ. Christ’s presence is certainly interruptive, yet the goal of this interruption is historical fellowship between the Lord who walks his path and the people who follow along behind.

A similar danger with this account of Christ’s promeity is that it lapses from Christocentrism to Christomonism. The Holy Spirit becomes particularly important at just this point. I have followed Bonhoeffer by foregrounding Christ as an irreducibly particular and personal figure, but what about the Spirit? Though the Holy Spirit does not often become a direct object of focus in his work, I contend, in his defense, that the notion of discipleship disintegrates without the mediating activity of a personal Spirit. The claim that the Spirit is merely a manifestation of a certain dimension of Jesus’ own identity—perhaps a mode, power, or emanation of Christ himself—would call into question the presence-otherness tension characteristic of Bonhoeffer’s discipleship Christology. A personal

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67 On the idea that God is “at hand but not in hand,” see Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearsing the Gospel as News* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

68 As Colin Gunton notes, “the presence of Christ is not as but through the Spirit, who is the mediator both of Christ’s presence and his…otherness” (“‘Until He Comes’: Toward an Eschatology of Church Membership,” 197, emphasis original). Bonhoeffer similarly avers that the Spirit is independent and personal, not a “neutral power,” a “collective spirit,” or a general gift that proceeds from Christ’s overall activity (DBWE 14, 482).

69 A similar line of thinking emerges in Robert Jenson’s critique of Barth, “You Wonder Where the Spirit Went,” *Pro Ecclesia* 2, no. 3 (1993): 296-304. Jenson suggests that Barth lapses into functional binitarianism by reducing the Spirit to a power of Christ or to Christ’s own work of coordination with his congregation. In this sense, the Spirit becomes a mode of Christ and not a distinct person. Jenson suggests that Barth’s Spirit-avoidance is closely linked to his avoidance
account of the Spirit as the one Jesus sends allows the church simultaneously to uphold, on the one hand, Christ’s irreducible singularity and utter out-ahead-ness, and, on the other, his gracious presence and promeity. Christ strides through history leading the church into the Father’s kingdom, and the Spirit spans the gap between Christ and his people, leading them into all truth, conforming them to him, and thereby drawing them into his ongoing activity.

As with the Christological question, this Pneumatology deserves fuller treatment than I can give it here. By gesturing toward the Spirit’s important role, we can at least see that a doctrine of the Trinity is operative within the discipleship motif, even if it is more often implied than expressly stated. Certainly, the Trinity does not exert a structuring role for Bonhoeffer the way it does for many classical theologians, nor does he often speculate about God’s being in itself. Even so, we find no evidence that he questioned the notion of God’s triune aseity. As Clifford Green persuasively argues, “the doctrine of the Trinity is an unquestioned presupposition of Bonhoeffer’s theology.”

of the church. In this project, I echo Barth’s Christocentricity, but I attempt to do so without avoiding the church, which is why the Spirit remains important as a singular person of the Trinity.

Unsurprisingly, Bonhoeffer adamantly affirms the *Filioque*. In his estimate, the struggle against the German Christians rendered the doctrine vital to the Christian witness, for its absence would open the door to an account of the Spirit not bound to the Jewish flesh of Jesus—e.g., a uniquely völkisch Geist. He strongly criticizes the view that “the Spirit also comes through nature and the creation,” which would amount to a perverse “deification of the natural” (DBWE 14, 482). He believed that binding the Spirit to Christ undermined the very possibility of natural theology and its destructive racial effects. Even more particularly, he insists that the Spirit comes only through the cross of Christ, thereby suggesting that God’s presence in the world today remains always a cruciform presence (see DBWE 14, 481). For Bonhoeffer, in short, the Spirit is always bound to Jesus: “The condition for the coming of the Spirit is the departure of Jesus” and thus the “Spirit comes only from Jesus Christ” (DBWE 14, 481-2).

Even in Bonhoeffer's “non-religious” writings from prison, it seems unlikely that he had any intention of abandoning inherited orthodoxy. This is evident, for example, in his repeated insistence that he desires to be “theological” and not “liberal” and in his use of the arcane discipline to guard the secrets of Christianity in the midst of the church’s worldly life. It is telling that Webster is not fond of Bonhoeffer’s most mature work: “The prison texts do not contain the most important or interesting things which Bonhoeffer had to say: there is much more theological good sense on questions of the presentation of the gospel to be found in the Finkenwalde homiletics lectures” (“In the Shadow,” 75).

Clifford J. Green, “Trinity and Christology in Bonhoeffer and Barth,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 60, no 1-2 (2006), 2. Green agrees with Charles Marsh, who distinguishes between God’s “primary objectivity” (which includes notions of aseity and Trinity) and God’s “secondary objectivity” (which includes notions of promeity and Christology).
For Bonhoeffer, promeity assumes aseity, which means that a doctrine of the Trinity functions, as he says, to preserve God’s wonder and mystery even as God is with us and for us in Jesus.  

Webster might raise a final criticism. When writing about the nature of the church’s invisibility, he contrasts his position with one that he explicitly locates in Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship*. In particular, he worries about the resonances between Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology and an inflated account of “the concept of ‘practice’ as it has been developed in social and cultural theory.” He suggests that by prioritizing visibility and sociality through a robust account of “practice,” contemporary ecclesiologies risk losing sight of God and thereby risk sliding into a form of ecclesiological Monophysitism that reduces the church to a purely human reality. These are valid fears, and we would do well to remain alert to them.

In fairness to Bonhoeffer, however, the resonances are less pronounced than Webster suggests. While Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology shares points of overlap with contemporary communion ecclesiologies and the notion of practice that emerges in strands of social theory, his entire theological career is marked both by conversing with social theory and also distinguishing genuine theology from it. Rather than parroting intellectual trends, he frames his ecclesiology within the logic

March claims that while Bonhoeffer’s focus tends to fall on the latter (in contrast to Barth), his emphasis on promeity always presupposes aseity; the latter is never meant to denigrate the former. See *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3-31. For a contrary reading of Bonhoeffer and the Trinity, see George Hunsinger’s review of Marsh in *Modern Theology* 12, no. 1 (1996), where he claims, “Precisely because of his Ritschlian heritage…Bonhoeffer always accepted the axiom that it is impossible to speak of God’s being as it is in itself” (122).

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73 See Bonhoeffer, DBWE 10, 461. Regarding the importance of a conception of eternity undergirding Bonhoeffer’s thinking, see DBWE 10, 538. On the vital relationship between Trinity and Christology, see DBWE 12, 355: “God who became human is the God of glory; God glorifies himself in the human. This is the ultimate mystery of the Trinity. From ‘now unto eternity,’ God regards himself as the God who became human.”

74 Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” 98.

75 Ibid., 99.
of the gospel. Webster worries about over-emphasizing the historicity of the church, its being as an endurable reality, and its social-historical visibility. Bonhoeffer would agree that ecclesiological naturalism looms within such inclinations. He suggests, for example, that certain dangers lurk within a theology too strongly focused on the congregation and “too strongly oriented to praxis.” He even suggests that an over-emphasis on practices risks displacing the importance of the Trinity and Christology, for both “ministry and church spring from the triune God.”

Webster is therefore wrong to criticize Bonhoeffer for his concrete emphasis on ecclesial life. To equate Bonhoeffer’s vision with contemporary trends is to miss the unique possibilities his thought presents. This is especially true when thinking about the church as a hermeneutical space. Rather than being the anthropological corollary of a version of social immanentism, thereby funding a form of hermeneutical Pelagianism that seeks to produce meaning, the notion of practices that emerges within Bonhoeffer’s discipleship motif remains thoroughly concrete and yet essentially receptive, predicated upon the gracious otherness and livelihood of the risen Christ.

**Toward A Bonhoefferian Hermeneutic of Discipleship**

My argument in this chapter presses toward a reconfiguration of the church’s hermeneutical situation. Within the discipleship motif Christ is more than a speaker or teacher; he is the one who goes ahead of his followers and leads them into new patterns of existence. Put differently, the word of God does not mean something, it is something. Therefore, we should not reduce the

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77 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 230. See Green, “Trinity and Christology in Bonhoeffer and Barth,” 12.
hermeneutical situation to an encounter between a speaking Christ and a listener. Without abandoning the obviously verbal elements of word theologies, Bonhoeffer presses us toward a more complex and holistic vision of Christ’s action vis-à-vis his people. When Christ speaks, it certainly creates what Webster refers to as “cognitive fellowship,” though it is not limited to that. To “hear” Christ’s address is not simply to be gifted with new intellectual quantities. Within the framework of discipleship, the hermeneutical goal is more holistic; we read the text as a means of faithfully walking behind our Lord.

Bonhoeffer further suggests that not only the goal but the very process of interpretation must be thickly depicted. Within the church, precisely because it is constituted by Christ’s call, we encounter a unique form of knowing, a mode of apprehension distinctive to revelation. “Do not interpret or apply, but do it and obey. That is the only way Jesus’ word is really heard,” Bonhoeffer suggests.78 For him, doing and obeying are part and parcel to hearing Jesus in the text. Understanding is therefore predicated upon the ongoing process of discipleship. The activity of faith situated receptively vis-à-vis the risen Christ takes concrete shape as a mode of existence caught up in the activity of following. Christ’s call does not impart knowledge as much as it sustains a way of life through which knowledge becomes possible. Discipleship is not merely the outcome of hermeneutical faithfulness but its very shape and context. Indeed, discipleship is a fundamental presupposition of knowing Christ.

With this, Bonhoeffer presages later developments in philosophical hermeneutics that note the interrelatedness of epistemology and practice.79 To borrow from Bourdieu, the notion of

78 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 181.

discipleship functions for Bonhoeffer as a Christologically defined *habitus*, a form of knowing inscribed in the body by past experience. Bonhoeffer’s account, of course, remains robustly theological. According to him, the pursuit of *textually mediated knowledge* requires interpretation, while the pursuit of *Jesus* requires obedience. For this reason he contrasts the pharisaical pursuit of knowledge with the Christian pursuit of Christ. The Christian hermeneutical enterprise is caught up within this latter pursuit. In terms of the discipleship paradigm, Scripture functions as one of the primary means by which Christ addresses the community, becomes present to it, and draws it along into active fellowship with him.

Because Christ confronts the church through its reading, the ultimate telos of interpretation is not only to understand the text (as it would be if revelation were collapsed into textuality) but also to understand the address of God that comes through it. When properly situated within the church as the *creatura verbi*, hermeneutical inquiry terminates with Christ himself. We read so as to have *communion* with him, and though *communication* is central to this communion, the two are not identical. The question driving the hermeneutical enterprise is always both “what is going on in this text?” (the penultimate hermeneutical question) and Bonhoeffer’s famous “who is Jesus Christ for

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81 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 325.

82 For a recent example that risks conflating communication and communion, see Scott Swain’s *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*. 
us today?” (the ultimate hermeneutical question). We read the text because and as we inquire in this way.

In other words, we read the text within the space of discipleship. When we ignore this—when we ignore the material dimensions of the word himself and the embodied nature of following after him—reading threatens to remain stuck in the ideational realm. We end up imagining that the poles of interpretation are written texts. On this misguided assumption, the skilled interpreter is the one who takes one text (made difficult by cultural and temporal distance) and turns it into a different text (made accessible by means of interpretive activity). Interpretation becomes a matter of navigating the gap between then and now so as to present the text in contemporary idiom. Interpretation is reduced to translation, and the task of the interpreter is reduced to something like decoding, giving new arrangement and expression to old words so as to render them accessible. The hermeneutical goal becomes (perhaps implicitly) what Raymond Williams refers to as consumption; interpreting becomes “concerned with understanding an object in such a way that it can be profitably or correctly consumed.” Stated more straightforwardly, the danger is that scriptural interpretation becomes a complex game of information gathering. This danger lurks in all modes of reading. Rusty Reno argues that even much of what passes as “theological exegesis” is

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83 Nicholas Lash, “Performing the Scriptures,” in Theology on the Way to Emmaus, 37-46.

84 See A. K. M. Adam, “Poaching on Zion: Biblical Theology as Signifying Practice,” in Reading Scripture with the Church, 17-34.

85 Quoted in Lash, Theology on the Way to Emmaus, 84.

essentially abstractive in nature in that it seeks to draw out something theological from the text (e.g., a doctrine or concept).  

For Bonhoeffer, conversely, the text seeks to draw us along into walking the path Jesus walks. When we think of the revelatory process in and through the text within the framework of following after Jesus and hence in terms of both patterns of life and patterns of knowing, the hermeneutical task takes on new layers. Contrary to the standard practice, Nicholas Lash suggests that the poles of the interpretive process are not “expressions of ‘meaning’” but “patterns of human action.” He contends that a faithful interpretation of a biblical text might look like a life of witness. He presses further: “I would wish to argue that the fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of scripture is, in the concrete, the life, activity and organization of the Christian community, and that the Christian practice consists…in the performance or enactment of the biblical text.”

Richard Kearney gets at something similar, though from a more distinctly philosophical perspective, when he suggests that in much hermeneutical discussion “the journey from flesh to text often lacked a return ticket.” With the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy (he specifically has in mind the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur in the 1960s) Kearney contends that “we witness an embrace of language at the expense of body.” This is not to deny that important insights arose from this movement; it is to say, however, that preoccupation with textual and linguistic representation risks missing something more fundamental to the process of human knowing. According to

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88 He suggests Maximilian Kolbe’s life as an example (Theology on the Way to Emmaus, 89-90).

89 Lash, Theology on the Way to Emmaus, 90.

Kearney, “we find the ‘linguistic turn’ of hermeneutics tending to veer away from the carnal as a site of meaning, replacing body with book, feeling with reading, sensing with writing.” Kearney is making a significant argument about the trajectory of continental philosophy since Heidegger, arguing in a fresh way for the re-appropriation of Husserl’s emphasis on the primacy of Leib as that which constitutes psychic reality.\(^9\) The task of understanding, he suggests, must break free from old dualisms between nous and soma. The danger of the so-called “hermeneutical turn,” he contends, is that we lose this unity and consequently trade embodiment for textuality. In specifically theological terms, we lose the incarnation of the word behind its textual inspiration.

Kearney and others are attempting to argue philosophically for something that incarnational theology should presuppose: embodiment is integral to knowing. Understanding—if God is the one we seek to understand—comes through Christ’s flesh, and, if we take Bonhoeffer seriously, it is mediated through our bodies as he calls us to follow him. Christ asks the disciples to put down their nets (Mk. 1:18) before he asks “Who do you say that I am?” (Mk. 8:29). The following is the condition of the knowing.

Kearney’s insight is relevant for our discussion, for much of what passes today as theological interpretation is in some sense predicated (if not dependent) upon the linguistic turn in philosophy. We have come to see that language—and hence tradition, narrative, horizon—is hermeneutically fundamental. Taken seriously, this claim paves the way for a return to the church as a hermeneutical space. These hermeneutical trends have done much for theological interpretation, not least by showing how “being the church” is a prerequisite for reading faithfully.

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In this chapter I have been complexifying this common claim by suggesting that we take this notion of “space” seriously. Reading within the church involves reading in light of a language, tradition, and narrative—but it also involves reading in the space created by Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Webster notes that the so-called linguistic turn in theological hermeneutics often lacks specifically theological dimensions, that talk of text and reader can fill in for talk of God. Here he is surely right, though in making this important assertion against the standard theological appropriation of hermeneutical philosophy we nevertheless risk replicating its linguistic preoccupation. The danger is not simply that the hermeneutical process underplays divine language but also that it loses touch with the materiality and cruciformity basic to Christian faith.

Conclusion: Webster, Bonhoeffer, and the Church as a Christological Space

In Part One (chapters 1 and 2) I have begun to explore the church’s constitutive dynamics and the account of hermeneutical space these dynamics create. I have first considered the church’s relationship to God—the church as the *creatura verbi*—and have suggested that this is the ultimate context of hermeneutical activity. In subsequent chapters I will add depth to this account by considering the various proximate contexts of the hermeneutical enterprise.

The constructive vision that has emerged follows Webster in this important regard: “Fruitful theological work on these issues requires us to give sustained attention to a figure who has virtually disappeared from theological hermeneutics in the modern era, namely, Jesus, of whose risen and self-communicative presence the Bible and its reading are a function.”92 Hermeneutically, this

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92 Webster, “Hermeneutics in Modern Theology,” 308.
implies that the church’s reading is essentially receptive in nature, an activity of faith. The nature of Christ’s presence to the community issues in a posture of openness and outwardness enacted concretely through various practices of un-mastery. I have noted the fundamental importance of prayer and confession, though in order to fully grasp the hermeneutical significance of such practices we must attend to the various proximate contexts of hermeneutical activity in the chapters to come.

The basic hermeneutical liability lurking within the *creatura verbi* is that the word that constitutes the church remains abstract and disembodied. For this reason, I have taken the incarnate and cruciform nature of God’s *verbum* with utmost seriousness. I have followed Webster’s lead in articulating a theological ontology of the reading space created by the Risen One’s address, but have done so by accenting aspects of Jesus’ presence to his community that go underdeveloped in many traditional Protestant accounts. It is precisely the lordship of this particular Nazarene that creates the church and gives it shape across time. I have suggested that the space this man creates by calling people to himself is the church’s hermeneutical space, the space in and for which Jesus’ followers faithfully engage their text. Within this space, engaging Scripture is a material, historical, and spatial event. “Meaning”—when we are talking about this text and this Lord—is a way of life, an embodiment, a performance. Intellectual understanding and concrete ways of living cannot be segregated. This makes the hermeneutical task more complex, and I have begun to gesture toward some of the implications that follow. As I move on to consider the church’s other constitutive dynamics, I will fill out this account by noting the importance of concrete acts of togetherness (Part Three) and missionary encounters with the world (Part Four). Now, however, I turn to consider the church in relation to its historical-institutional past. Christ’s call creates a community that stretches
across space and time, which is why the church as a hermeneutical space is marked by a shared institutional history.
PART TWO: THE CHURCH AS A HISTORICAL INSTITUTION

I noted earlier that the hermeneutical process depicted in Luke 24 is ultimately Christological. When Christ calls disciples, he creates the ultimate context in which they faithfully engage their text. As Bonhoeffer demonstrates, this call constitutes the church as a unique structural entity that is grounded in God’s grace, resists empirical explanation, and yet remains a visible social reality that corresponds to Christ’s ongoing movement as the risen Lord. Yet other dimensions of existence are implicated in it. For the first disciples, the process of understanding arose as the past—i.e., tradition, narrative, and inherited hopes—comes into conversation with the risen Lord. For them, past and future collide in the Christological present. Jesus does not bypass the disciples’ inherited past but brings it to life by shining his resurrection light upon it. In having their eyes opened, the disciples are not subsequently abstracted from the continuities of their history. Instead, this radically new event requires them to learn to see this continuity in new ways. The resurrection forces the disciples to imagine new forms of faithfulness that are at once continuous with their inherited past and yet inflected through the presence of Christ. The New Testament itself is a product of this creative tension. Those who receive new sight from the risen Lord do not abandon their old texts and traditions but read them in new ways.¹ Even in the space of the risen Christ, the institutional past remains hermeneutically consequential.

As Bonhoeffer recognized, Christ’s call creates a community with a social history. “Between us and the Bible,” he writes, “there stands a church that has a history.”² One cannot understand the

¹ See Hays, “Reading Scripture in Light of the Resurrection.” It is also noteworthy that Jesus’ followers decided not merely to edit and expand their inherited texts (in keeping with key elements of the OT interpretive tradition) but to add entirely new ones.

² Bonhoeffer, DBWE 16, 495.
Bible, he goes on to suggest, without an awareness of the church’s historical dimensions. In Bonhoeffer’s imagination, hermeneutical space is constituted both by the community’s relationship to the risen Christ and also by its relationship to its own historical past. Precisely as the *creatura verbi* the church is also a historical-institutional body. My primary goal in Part Two is to show how this is the case and what it means for faithful reading.

Acknowledging the hermeneutical significance of church history calls to mind the classical affirmation that Scripture does not stand alone but becomes intelligible in light of tradition. The relationship between Scripture and tradition is, of course, one of the most vexed debates in post-Reformation theology. Taking it up places us squarely within the classical tension between Catholic and Protestant hermeneutics. Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Ratzinger, summarizes the situation well when he claims that for Protestantism the word guarantees the ministry of the church, but for Catholicism the ministry of the church guarantees the word. “Perhaps in this reversal of relations between word and ministry lies the real opposition between the views of the church held by Catholics and Reformers.”

By prioritizing the church’s constitutive relationship to the risen word I am in this project offering a distinctly Protestant account of hermeneutical space. Yet as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Catholic voice deserves attention, for it helps prevent the excesses of hyper-Protestantism. The various authorities involved in the hermeneutical process must be differentiated and ordered, not placed in competition. Carl Braaten expresses this point well: “The church is the creature of the Word; the Word is prior. But in the order of human experience the church comes

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before the gospel. We might put it this way: in the order of being *(ordo essendi)* the gospel comes before the church, but in the order of knowledge *(ordo cognoscendi)* the church comes before the gospel." One can ontologically prioritize the ongoing activity of the Risen One while insisting that the church provides access to this activity. Christ and tradition, event and institution, revelation and history—together these shape one and the same hermeneutical space.

My goal in Part Two is neither to untangle all the threads of Scripture-tradition debates nor to highlight all their historical dimensions. Instead, I hope to show how attending to the risen Christ allows us to articulate a coherent vision of the hermeneutical task that accounts for both the church’s Christological and historical-institutional dimensions.

By “institution” I simply mean a historical society with consistent visible structures, a social entity that exists beyond the lifetime of its members. The church is an institution in that its oneness takes form concretely in history. Of course, there are different ways of accenting the institutional dimension of the church. Avery Dulles suggests that a sound ecclesiology will uphold the institutional elements of the church without devolving into distortive onesidedness in which the visible structures become the defining feature of the church’s existence, what he calls rigid institutionalism. He notes that hermeneutical implications lie close at hand; an institution can

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6 Ibid., 41. Institutionalism entails what he calls a deformed view of the true nature of the church in which the institution becomes the hierarchical machinery of the mediation of grace. According to Dulles, the tendency is not inherent to Catholicism as such but began to develop in late Middle Ages and Reformation period as Catholic theologians responded to the Protestant Reformers (41). In the worst cases, this counter-reformational impulse resulted in a view of the church as a totalizing institution that exists for the sake of itself, similar to the way a nation state exists for the good of its citizens. Also see Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of Laity*, trans. Donald Attwater 1965, (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962) 44-45, where he similarly warns against turning ecclesiology into “hierarchology.”
function as a “zone of stability” that allows the community to navigate into an “uncertain present” on the basis of “an esteemed religious past.” Examining how the institution performs this hermeneutical function is one of my tasks in chapter 3.

My initial guide is Robert Jenson, one of contemporary theology’s most influential voices and one whose work over recent decades has been at the cutting edge of larger movements in ecclesial hermeneutics. Jenson is a fascinating object of study in his own right, yet I engage him here for a specific purpose. He serves my larger constructive project in two particular ways. On the one hand, he lucidly unpacks the logic of the church’s historical and institutional existence and highlights the constructive hermeneutical value of locating Scripture within that history. On the other hand, certain weaknesses in his thinking signal the dangers that might emerge when the hermeneutical dimensions of the church’s institutional past become inflated beyond their capacity.

In this sense, Jenson’s function in Part Two formally mirrors Webster’s in Part One, though in a materially opposite way. When Webster’s revelational hermeneutic and Jenson’s institutional hermeneutic are pressed to the extreme, they seem to stand markedly at odds with each other. For this reason, I introduce Dietrich Bonhoeffer in chapter 4 as a means of forging a constructive synthesis between Christological and institutional logics that might otherwise seem incommensurate. As with the conversation between Webster and Bonhoeffer, Jenson and Bonhoeffer evidence significant points of resonance and notable differences in emphasis. Whereas Jenson accentuates the historical-institutional logic of hermeneutics, Bonhoeffer remains alert to Christ’s irreducibly particular presence with and ahead of the community. In this sense, the Bonhoefferian notion of Nachfolge remains an important structuring motif. Following Bonhoeffer’s lead, I attempt to

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7 Dulles, Models of the Church, 47.
reinscribe the historical-institutional dimensions of hermeneutical faithfulness within a Christological account of ecclesial space. I argue, in short, that the *creatura verbi* is the necessary site of the practices and postures that enact historical-institutional faithfulness.
Chapter 3: Jenson’s Theological Vision: God, Christ, and Church

Jenson’s Revisionary Metaphysic

In order to explore the specifically hermeneutical dimensions of Jenson’s theology it will be helpful briefly to highlight their theological underpinnings. These underpinnings take shape as he provides a unique answer an old problem. In its appropriation of the Mediterranean theology that antedated Jesus, the church inherited a particularly perplexing task: how to resolve “the old dissonance between the metaphysical principles of the Greeks and the storytelling of the gospel.”8 Jenson worries that by uncritically allowing pagan philosophy to determine its thinking, the church in the West drifted from narrative particularity to metaphysical abstraction, unwittingly pitting the God of its theology against the God of its scriptures. At the heart of his project, therefore, is the desire to free the church to read Scripture faithfully.

Perhaps the most telling sign of this theological dilemma is the loss of trinitarian language in much contemporary church life. The way forward, Jenson argues, requires theological reconstruction, which is why he summarizes his project as “an effort of revisionary metaphysics, aimed at allowing one to say things about God that scripture seems to require but that inherited metaphysics inhibits.”9 Axiomatic to his revisionary system is the belief that God is identified with and not merely by the economy of salvation.10 Whereas much Western theology has insisted upon inserting an analogical interval between God’s immanent and economic existence, Jenson maintains

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that the plot of the life of God and his people is the whole reality of God; “history occurs not only in him but as his being.”\textsuperscript{11}

Jenson’s attempt to blaze a revisionary trail has much to commend it, not least in that it forces the church to attend to the logic of its text with fresh eyes. A full analysis of Jenson’s theological vision exceeds the limits of this project, yet in order to set the stage for our analysis of the church, two points are worth highlighting. First, Jenson refuses to import an unbaptized notion of eternity into the theological task. Running against the grain of much of the tradition, he contends that eternity and time are in fact positively, not negatively, related. Like creatures, God has time, but unlike them, God is in no way bound in having it. God does not transcend the contingencies, movements, and passions of history; what God transcends is having any personal limitation thereby.\textsuperscript{12} In Jenson’s vision, God is not a static substance that eternally perdures, coasting above history unscathed, but a life that becomes as the future approaches.

A close reading reveals that Jenson’s unique construal of time and eternity is foundational to this entire theological project, allowing him to reimagine inherited metaphysical beliefs without abandoning the church’s traditional language about God. It is at just this point that the revisionary—and to some readers, counterintuitive—nature of his thought becomes are most apparent.\textsuperscript{13} Jenson

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 221.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 66, 138-145.
\textsuperscript{13} See, e.g., Simon Gathercole, “Pre-Existence, and the Freedom of the Son in Creation and Redemption: An Exposition in Dialogue with Robert Jenson,” \textit{International Journal of Systematic Theology} 7, no. 1 (2005): 38-51 and Oliver Crisp, “Robert Jenson on the Pre-Existence of Christ,” \textit{Modern Theology} 23, no. 1 (2007): 27-45. Crisp contends that Jenson becomes incoherent in his talk about time: “God is temporally infinite. This sounds like the view that God endures through time…in which case, like all other things in time, it would seem that God has a past, a present and a future…But Jenson denies this ‘Aristotelian’ picture of divine temporality. What does he replace it with? A notion that God is temporally infinite, but has no past or future and is past and present to himself because he is somehow future to himself. It is rather as if God exists through time by projecting himself backwards in time from his future to his past and present. But what could that possible mean? (35).”
\end{quote}
contends that the problem that perplexes critics has more to do with their assumptions than with his theology. Some find his account of time unsatisfactory “only because we unthinkingly make an (in itself rather naïve) assumption about that time: that it glumly marches on…But time, in any construal adequate to the gospel, does not in fact march in this wooden fashion. Time…is neither linear nor cyclical but perhaps more like a helix, and what it spirals around is the risen Christ.”

Here Jenson’s driving concern is fairly straightforward: one should construct a theology of time and eternity in light of the New Testament rather than importing a preconceived notion into it.

His Christological account of eternity opens space for a radical reimagining of the relationship between Jesus’ divine and human natures. This is the second important point to note, for it fundamentally shapes his ecclesiology. By eliminating the gap between God’s immanent and economic reality, Jenson suggests that the second person of the Trinity is none other than Jesus, the man from Nazareth. With no ontological shield protecting heaven from earth, the way is opened for a radically Cyrillian account of the communion of attributes. In revising the traditional metaphysical claims that have undergirded much Western theology, Jenson even goes so far as to reject the very existence of the entity normally known as the logos asarkos, the invention of which was a “historic mistake.” It was the “aggressively incarnate protagonist” of the gospel narrative who claims, “Before Abraham was, I am,” thereby putting his antecedence to Abraham in the present

14 Robert W. Jenson, “Scripture’s Authority in the Church,” in The Art of Reading Scripture, 35.

15 As we will see more fully below, Cyril of Alexandria’s logic funds Jenson’s uniquely narrative account of Scripture. By refusing to divide the protagonist of the Gospels into two subjects, one human and one divine, Cyril provides “theological warrant to read the Gospels whole as God’s own story” (Jenson, Systematic Theology, Vol. 1, 128-9).

tense.\(^\text{17}\) With this, Jenson’s historicist logic stretches as far as it can go. The second person of the Trinity is not an “extra metaphysical entity…He is Mary’s child, the hanged man of Golgotha.”\(^\text{18}\)

These two points are significant for this chapter’s argument because they dovetail into a particular conception of ecclesial space. If “Jesus’ human action and presence is without mitigation God’s action and presence,”\(^\text{19}\) and if no heavenly logos hides behind the back of the man from Nazareth, an important question arises: where do we presently locate the Risen One? If the second person of the Trinity is inseparable from a historical and material body, where now is that body?\(^\text{20}\)

Jenson answers unequivocally: the church. A body is someone’s objective availability to others, he suggests, and the Risen One possesses such availability as the community of his people, the body of Christ.\(^\text{21}\) More than a mere metaphor, this piece of Pauline theology is an “ontic identification.”\(^\text{22}\) “The object—the body—that the risen Christ is…is the church around her


\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., 145.

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., 144.


\(^\text{22}\) Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 204. Regarding the non-metaphorical nature of Paul’s “Body of Christ” imagery, see Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 190. Also see Judith Brown, “The Pattern of Theological Truth: An Interview with Robert Jenson,” *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 22, no. 1 (2015): 32, in which Jenson claims that in its fundamental usage, body of Christ language in Paul is not a metaphor; Paul is speaking propositionally. The church is quite literally the place in the world where you look if you want to see Christ. Jenson admits, of course, that after asserting this proposition, Paul proceeds to exploit it metaphorically, e.g., in talking about the head and the feet.
sacraments. He needs no other body to be a risen man, body and soul...Heaven is where God takes space in his creation to be present to the whole of it; he does that in the church.”

With this, the effects of Jenson’s revisionary metaphysic have rippled into ecclesiology. In rethinking the nature of God’s time and Jesus of Nazareth’s role in the Triune life, Jenson has suggested a very particular account of ecclesial space—this space is the body of Christ.

**An Institutional Hermeneutic**

Jenson’s presses his Cyrillian logic into the being of the church. Just as one cannot imagine a *logos asarkos* in distinction from the man from Nazareth, neither can one imagine an invisible or eternal ecclesial entity hiding behind the visible and temporal institution. The church in history is the present tense of Jesus, his availability for the world. Because of this, its visible continuity takes on great importance. A church that lacks it would be as senseless as a person who lacks a body. For this reason, Jenson stands as an exemplar of my second ecclesiological dimension. Rather than following “the Reformation emphasis that the church is in a special sense ‘the creature of the gospel,’” he foregrounds the “traditional question about the founding of the church...That is, [ecclesiology] presumes the actual historical existence of the church and inquires into its origin and nature.”

As it does in his doctrine of God, the notion of time takes on great importance in Jenson’s ecclesiology. Whereas Protestantism’s account of the church, as Jenson understands it, is determined by an account of revelation, his account is governed by a depiction of the church’s unique temporal

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24 Ibid., 201.

location. “God institutes the church by not letting Jesus’ Resurrection be itself the End,” Jenson writes.26 At Pentecost, the Spirit frees a human community to be Christ’s body during this unique eschatological detour. The church’s existence, in other words, is contingent upon the space that has been opened between Resurrection and Parousia.

Within this unique stretch of time, the church has a particular mission: “The purpose that constitutes and distinguishes the church…is maintenance of a particular message, called ‘the gospel.’”27 Elsewhere he writes, “Any community that intends to live for more than a moment, that hopes to remain itself through some term of yesterday-today-and-tomorrow, will have to deal with the fragility of an identity thus stretched across time.”28 Perhaps due to his futurist ontology, Jenson eschews an account of divine sovereignty that would protect the fragile institution as it traverses through time. He instead declares that the “the church’s diachronic identity is as threatened by the passage of time as is that of any other community.”29 This raises a vital question: how is the church to survive in time as a fragile, threatened community?

**Touchstones of Continuity: Canon and Creed**

Jenson’s hermeneutical vision begins to emerge as he provides a definitive answer. The way to deal with this fragility, he contends, is through “structures of historical continuity” established by means of “deliberate institutions that would be constitutive of [the church’s] life.”30

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26 Ibid., 170.
29 Ibid., 3, emphasis added.
Institutions constitute a community’s diachronic identity and simply in their own power as institutions establish a purely inner-historical continuity through times. The historical ground of the church’s institutions is the events told in the Gospels. And however peculiar a historical event one of these events, the Resurrection, was, the relation of the community thus founded to its historical ground obeys the usual regularities: when one knows the circumstances of the church’s historical origin one can predict what general sort of institutions the church must have.  

For Jenson, in other words, the church is a historical community that functions as such, which means that particular structures of continuity are necessary to ensure the perpetuation of its identity. These structures of continuity, for Jenson, also constitute the hermeneutical space within which the church reads Scripture faithfully. They do so, most fundamentally, by bridging the so-called “hermeneutical gap.” Whereas hermeneutical theory is traditionally predicated upon the distance between the initial recipients of a text and those who attempt to read it in the present, Jenson’s account of the church as the institutionally maintained presence of Christ’s body undercuts this logic. At just this point Jenson would have us see that modern criticism errs by methodologically presupposing the non-existence of “one diachronically identical universal church.” Guided by this errant commitment, critical historians employ hermeneutical tools and methods to surmount the distance separating them from the text. For Jenson, this is nothing short of a sectarian enterprise, for it necessarily posits a reading community other than the church and is, by definition, a non-Christian enterprise (even if undertaken by people of faith). In contrast, Jenson avers that “there is no historical distance between the community in which the Bible appeared and the church that now seeks to understand the Bible, because these are the same community.” Because of this, “Past and

32 Ibid., 280.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 279.
present do not need to be bridged before understanding can begin, since they are always already mediated by the continuity of the community’s language and discourse.”\textsuperscript{35} At this point, the logic of Jenson’s account of hermeneutical space becomes especially clear. To read within the church is to read under the guidance of this mediated continuity.

Had Jesus returned immediately, as some early Christians expected, institutions of diachronic continuity would have been superfluous. The first-hand living memory of the apostles and their disciples would have established communal identity. But Jesus did not soon return, and thus “the telephone-game problem became apparent.”\textsuperscript{36} When living memory began to fade, it had to be institutionalized. According to Jenson, the Spirit gifted the church with the means of this institutional continuity at precisely this precarious point in its historical life. In particular, the Spirit gave the church the canon and the creed, concrete touchstones that forged communal continuity between past and present.\textsuperscript{37}

Regarding the canon, Jenson writes,

What Christians call the Bible...exists as a single entity because—and only because—the church gathered these documents for her specific purpose: to aid in preserving her peculiar message, to aid in maintaining across time, from the apostles to the End, the self-identity of her message that the God of Israel has raised his servant Jesus from the dead. Outside the community with this purpose, binding these particular documents into one volume would be pointless.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 280.

\textsuperscript{36} Jenson, \textit{Canon and Creed}, 4.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 1-7.

In contrast to the “currently fashionable doctrine of literary scholars...[which claims] that there is no text other than the logical product of interpretations,” Jenson claims that the living community, held in tact by institutional structures, provides stability to the text.\(^3\) One distinct text exists precisely to the extent that one distinct community exists. Because those who read Scripture are members of the same community that canonized it, to read these texts as anything other than Scripture is in fact a form of eisegesis.

Important interpretive implications follow. Given the church’s act of canonization, the texts are no longer confined to the space of their historical origin. Any particular meanings that may have been necessary to their original composition becomes secondary to the text’s meaning as a canonical whole within ecclesial space. Consequently, the church must direct its hermeneutical efforts toward just this text and no other.\(^4\) While this assertion seems simple, it actually stands in the face of much modern interpretive practice. Echoing key aspects of Frei’s notion of intratextuality, Jenson argues that the authority of the canon cannot be defined in reference to something outside of the story—e.g., historical events, religious experiences, or doctrinal truths. The text is not ultimately about something other than itself, not merely an instrument of reportage. By defining Scripture in terms of its institutional location and canonical form, Jenson loosens the text from its original *Sitz im Leben*. The interpretive enterprise does not terminate after the exegete has extracted linguistic details, reconstructed historical events, or separated the text into its constitutive redactional layers—even as such tasks may at times contribute to the larger interpretive process. For Jenson, this is a liberating

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4\(^\text{th}\) This is evident in Jenson’s own works of scriptural commentary. See *Song of Songs*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) and *Ezekiel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI, 2009). This is not to say that he avoids engaging the history behind the text or the text’s redactional layer—he indeed engages them in an *ad hoc* manner. And when he does, his final object of concern remains the text itself in its received form.
realization. Without needing to span the hermeneutical gap, readers of Scripture are free to use various tools and methods of interpretation in an ad hoc manner as means of attending to the canon’s actual language, to the literary topography of the text as it has been received in the church.  

This logic coincides with a particular narrative sensibility: “Since we are in the story, all procedures that read Scripture for information about some third entity are wrong.” In Lindbeck’s terminology, which maps nicely onto Jenson’s scriptural hermeneutic, the text functions as a narrationally structured symbolic world that the church seeks to indwell. Within historical-institutional space, the various tools used to engage Scripture ultimately serve to move the community within the text. As one of the chief pioneers of this sensibility suggests, “we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.”

In this way, Jenson’s historical-institutional hermeneutic resonates with larger trends that emphasize “narrative” as an interpretive category. Yet for Jenson, this is no literary fad. His

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41 Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 274. Among other things, this implies that “even biblical Greek and Hebrew must be familiar somewhere in the life of the church” (275). Likewise, Jenson strongly warns against the temptation of ever-new and more relevant translations (275 no. 19).

42 Jenson, “Scripture’s Authority in the Church,” 31.


44 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003), 15. Hans Frei has something similar in mind in his effort to retrieve the precritical notion of Scripture as a realistic narrative: “Biblical interpretation became an imperative need, but its direction was that of incorporating extra-biblical thought, experience, and reality into the one real world detailed and made accessible by the biblical story” (*Eclipse*, 3).

45 In a sense, Jenson’s strongly narrativized doctrine of God stands as the doctrinal telos of this hermeneutical trend. His principled resistance to metaphysics prevents him from moving beyond or above the text to a purer realm of theological meaning. God lives God’s own life in history, such that no supra-historical exegetical move is necessary.
historical-institutional ecclesiology provides the theological rationale for the intratextual turn. If, as he claims, the canon was shaped “to the general plot and understanding of the church’s story as she had been telling it all along,” then it functions precisely to maintain the continuity of the narrative. The church must indwell its story—its “history book,” as he calls it—precisely as a means of extending the story through history. The point of reading this text within this community is to become part of its narrative movement. Scripture exerts its authority precisely as it maintains the community’s identity in the midst of this movement. Scripture’s authority functions, in other words, the way a novel constrains its characters, and this precisely before the novel is finished.

Besides providing the canon and placing readers in an intratextual posture toward it, the church functions as a hermeneutical space in another important sense: it provides a hermeneutical optic. This optic, Jenson suggests, is the Apostles’ Creed, which functions as the second important touchstone of continuity. In particular, he suggests that the creed is the church’s “critical theory” for Scripture, i.e., the lens that allows the community to see what is really going on in the text. “The community positioned to perceive what a scriptural text is truly up to is the church,” he claims, “and the creed is the set of instructions for discerning this agenda.” He goes on to assert that “the needed suspicious eye is the eye trained in the church.” One must read Scripture in the church, Jenson suggests, because the church provides unique access to its content and the rules for reading it

46 Such grounding is often lacking in other proponents of this move, some of whom turn to narrative as a means of valuing Scripture without recourse to God. But for Jenson, a distinctly Cyrillian logic remains at play. His valuation of narrative and account of divine being go hand in hand.


48 Jenson, “Scripture’s Authority in the Church,” 32.

49 Jenson, Canon and Creed, 81.
properly. Criticism becomes truly critical, on this reading, not when it dispenses with presuppositions but when it embraces the right ones.

*Christ, Culture, and Catechesis*

Together, the touchstones of continuity help to shape a distinct culture. Jenson declares that the church, under the aid of the touchstones, “is responsible to cultivate her culture…[or will] lose her identity if she does not.”50 By claiming that the church in its diachronic continuity is Christ’s earthly presence, Jenson attempts to cut through the Gordian knot of Christ-culture debates. Rather than theorizing how these two entities might relate to each other, Jenson avers, quite simply, that *Christ is a culture.*51 Whereas H. R. Niebuhr’s famous typology suggests that Christ is one thing and culture another, Jenson’s account of Christ’s resurrected presence requires him to dispense with this faulty assumption.52 Christ has a body that is itself a community of bodies, and together these comprise one identifiable culture.53

This line of reasoning safeguards ecclesial stability. Whereas positing an invisible metaphysical entity lying behind the visible community would loose the empirical church from any specific form and thereby allow the community a degree of flexibility in its cultural life, Jenson’s claim that Christ is a culture anchors the empirical form of the community through time. Just as


51 Ibid.


Christ’s person does not fluctuate, neither does the culture that is his bodily presence. Christ and his communal body, Jenson implies, are the same yesterday, today, and forever. This does not, of course, disallow certain culturally contingent elements from participating in ecclesial life, but it does suggest the undergirding presence of a normative cultural pattern. The church’s task vis-à-vis competing cultures is not to adapt or modify its own (perhaps as a means of becoming culturally relevant, a desideratum Jenson would like to eradicate from the church’s imagination) but to remain consistently itself, to be the culture that Christ is.

Whereas much debate on the relationship between ecclesial and non-ecclesial cultures theorizes the possibility of an overlap or merging of the two, Jenson adamantly insists on their difference. “By his resurrection and ascension, Christ is a political fact among and in competition with the polities of this world.” He goes so far as to speak of this as a relationship of conflict: “We must expect other polities to make war against us.”

Jenson suggests that the church engages in this conflict and thereby maintains its cultural difference through rigorous observance of “discipline at its border.” The basic form of this discipline is catechesis, which Jenson calls a “long immersion in the church’s dogmatic, liturgical,

54 For example, Niebuhr’s “transforming culture” type in his *Christ and Culture*.

55 Jenson, “Christ as polity 1,” 328. This calls to mind Bellarmine’s infamous parallel between the church and nation states. Jenson suggests that the papacy’s occasional behavior as a literal government, complete with ministers of state and even a military, was a perversion—“But it was a perversion of something true” (329).

56 Ibid., 329. Though Jenson rejects Niebuhr’s typology, some critics suggest that he nevertheless articulates an account of Christ against culture; or, more accurately: the culture that Christ is stands against the other cultures and polities of the world. Schwöbel claims, for example, that in Jenson the Christ-culture debate morphs into a church-culture debate; see Christoph Schwöbel, “Once Again, Christ and Culture: Remarks on the Christological Bases of a Theology of Culture,” in *Trinity, Time, and Church*, 103-125. While a certain “againstness” characterizes the relationship between church and culture, Jenson unabashedly claims that all cultures have an ecclesial telos, for the church will eventually absorb all cultures. If Niebuhr’s view is dualistic, Jenson’s view becomes strongly monistic in that it absolutizes the church (see Schwöbel, 123).

and moral tradition.”\textsuperscript{58} Rather than a useful practice that helps to make the church more faithful than it otherwise might be, Jenson considers catechesis a matter of ecclesial survival.\textsuperscript{59} In less bellicose imagery, he likens the process of catechesis to the process of learning a language. The church is the community that speaks “Christianese,” he writes, and to enter its culture is to enter the logic of its grammar.\textsuperscript{60} Yet whether framed in martial or linguistic idiom, the threat is the same—the church might cease to be what she is by abandoning her cultural identity. The catechetical process exists, therefore, because there must be a way of passage from “non-Christian” to “Christian” (however “Christianized” the former may claim to be\textsuperscript{61}) that protects the cultural purity of the latter.

Practical hermeneutical implications lie close at hand. Within historical-institutional space, pedagogy becomes a primary hermeneutical tool. Faithful reading is catechized and disciplined reading, reading that accords with the church’s unique culture. For much of Christian history, this hermeneutical vision was assumed and did not need forthright argument. Yet given the church’s current post-Christendom context, Jenson believes that ecclesial faithfulness requires a new level of intentionality. Because historical-institutional continuity can no longer be assumed, it must become an object of focus. “The church in the West can no longer suppose that the regular schools or the organs of public opinion…will instruct people in a way that is harmonious with the church’s instruction. Indeed, we must assume the contrary: that they will inculcate ideological naturalism,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{58} Robert W. Jenson, “A Lesson to Us All,” \textit{Pro Ecclesia}, 3 no. 2 (1994): 135.
  \item \textsuperscript{59} Jenson, “Christ as polity,” 324.
  \item \textsuperscript{60} Jenson, \textit{Systematic Theology}, Vol. 1, 18.
\end{itemize}
moral relativism, and the superiority of all other religions to Christianity.”

The way forward requires drastic measures: “We may find ourselves willy-nilly emulating the roles of Celtic Christianity or of the Benedictines during the ‘dark ages.’ If the Church survives in the West as a tiny and despised community, let her attend to the authenticity of her own life…with the world viewing this strange body.”

*Jenson, MacIntyre, and “Traditioned Rationality”*

Jenson’s allusion to Benedictine communities calls to mind Alasdair MacIntyre’s enigmatic suggestion in the closing pages of *After Virtue*. After likening the cultural moment to the emergence of the dark ages in Europe, MacIntyre suggests that “what matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community in which [traditional forms of life] can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us…We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.” MacIntyre responds to modernity’s moral fragmentation, in other words, by insisting on the formation of distinct traditions and the communities necessary to sustain them. In particular, he suggests returning to Aristotelian notions of personhood and virtue in which the excellencies of human action are determined not by universal standards but by their coherence with the particular narrative of which people are a part and hence by the telos toward which communal

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62 Ibid., 142.


64 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 263.
life is patterned. He builds on these ideas by suggesting that all rational enquiry is tradition specific.65

“We need to recover…a conception of rational enquiry embodied in a tradition,” he writes, “a conception according to which the standards of justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history.”66 If modernity can be defined as an effort to flee the authority mediated by the traditions and institutions of the past,67 MacIntyre counters by challenging modernity’s claim to universal rationality, suggesting instead that rationality is necessarily tradition specific. To flee the past is to flee the very possibility of rational inquiry.

Placing MacIntyre next to Jenson illumines the latter’s guiding logic. Though Jenson’s animating concerns differ from MacIntyre’s in certain respects—e.g., he is motivated by the particular task of maintaining ecclesial faithfulness rather than broader issues pertaining to the rationality and coherence of moral discourse—he too offers a particular and inherently teleological view of human being. True humanity, Jenson suggests, is found in the church, and humanity’s true telos is participation in the triune life.

Setting these two thinkers next to each other is particularly relevant given the goal of this chapter, for it helps make sense of Jenson’s underlying hermeneutical logic. The church reads faithfully—it develops a mature “hermeneutical rationality,” he might say—when it indwells and embodies its specific tradition, when it becomes immersed in the particularity of its story. For Jenson, as we have seen, the structures of diachronic identity constitute this tradition as an

65 Regarding the tradition specific nature of rationality, see MacIntyre, After Virtue, 204-225. Again echoing MacIntyre, Jenson speaks of this history as an ongoing communal argument through time; cf., MacIntyre, Whose Justice? 12, 222.


67 As Jeffrey Stout has influentially claimed; see The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
inhabitable space, and catechetical and intratextual practices provide the main avenues by which one inhabits it. Jenson’s key hermeneutical practices, in other words, function precisely by placing the reader in a *traditioned posture*. By being absorbed into the culture and shaped to the contours of the story, one is equipped to read in a manner that is faithful to the text’s historical-institution location.

**Institutionalism and the Presence of Christ**

In Part One, I noted that Bonhoeffer’s account of the hermeneutical situation pressed him to accent two practices within the interpretive process: prayer and confession. In this chapter I suggested that Jenson’s ecclesiology likewise presses him toward two concrete practices: intratextually indwelling the narrative and catechetically indwelling ecclesial culture, both of which contribute to the formation of a tradition-based rationality appropriate to the story of this particular community.

Set next to each other, these sets of practices may seem discordant. Whereas the hermeneutical vision that emerged in Part One was built upon a foundation of listening, repentance, and self-criticism, Jenson’s hermeneutical vision seems to fund a very different interpretive posture. Whereas Bonhoeffer’s suggested hermeneutical orientation directs the reading community toward an extrinsic reality, Jenson seems to imply an insular process. The key to faithful reading, he implies, is to move ever more deeply within the church. Interpretive faithfulness, it would seem, is internal to the reading culture, such that the church, in and of itself, becomes hermeneutically sufficient.

Jenson’s trust in ecclesial culture is notably evident in his account of the resources required to read Scripture faithfully. “The Bible is the Spirit’s book, who may do with it what he will,” he
writes, “and the church as his prophet knows what that is.” Elsewhere he argues that trust in communal consciousness and trust in the Spirit are one and the same thing. Here a critical question becomes necessary. Binding the Spirit’s voice to ecclesial knowledge certainly has the benefit of aggrandizing the latter, but does it not also thereby threaten to devalue the former, constraining the Spirit’s freedom within the limits of ecclesial knowledge? Asked differently, if we equate communal consciousness with the Holy Spirit, does the Spirit actually need to do anything? It would seem that if the church already knows what the Spirit will say, as Jenson insists, the Spirit’s actual voice is rendered superfluous. This hermeneutic would work, it would seem, eti deus non dareetur. If “Holy Spirit” were merely a symbol for “institutional memory,” “tradition,” or “consciousness consciousness,” would the church need to alter its hermeneutical practices? If not, then a theoretical account of divine activity in the reading process has become mere doctrinal decoration, theological adornment without concrete effect. The church has its inherited culture—and for such a hermeneutic, this seems to suffice.

Given this interpretive posture, it is no surprise that Scripture becomes what Jenson calls a documentary relic. As the church’s history book, it functions analogously to the way other foundational cultural artifacts function within secular communities. I suggested earlier that Scripture belongs in the church but not to it. His institutional logic makes it difficult to uphold this distinction. As a text relic, Scripture becomes an aspect of culture, more properly an object at the church’s

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69 See Jenson *Canon and Creed*, 15-16.

disposal than a means of divine address.\footnote{Katherine Sonderegger, in her recent work, Systematic Theology Vol. 1, The Doctrine of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), implies something similar when she argues that one most properly understands Scripture in terms of a “sacramental analogy” (526). She suggests that Jenson, precisely because he so resolutely historicizes the text, underrepresents Scripture’s sacramentality, thereby reducing it to a secular entity. “Now, such a book belongs to the world of other books, though it is the best among them...[Its] aim is perfectly general. Against all other books of instruction, all other manuals of culture or doctrine or piety, against all other histories and law codes, the Bible stands out as the highest” (520-521).} Jenson’s reluctance to grant Scripture a sacramental function suggests that his hermeneutic disproportionately accents the institutional dimension of the church and thereby struggles to differentiate the text from its ecclesial location in any meaningful way.

Of course, he wants to affirm that Scripture is in some sense an agent that acts in distinction from the community. He maintains, for example, that even as Scripture is a collection of writings put together by the church, it is also the word of God that creates the church.\footnote{Jenson, Systematic Theology, Vol. 2, 276.} In this sense, it would seem that Scripture functions in both regulative and sacramental modes, as both “norm” and “address.” But what precisely does Scripture do? In answering this question, he lapses into onesidedly institutional logic. When Scripture does act in a seemingly sacramental way, it acts “to guard the integrity of a message” across time and thereby to preserve the church apostolic authenticity.\footnote{Jenson, Canon and Creed, 86-87; “On the Authorities of Scripture,” 59-60.} What Scripture does, in other words, is norm identity. Scripture’s sacramental capacity is thereby collapsed into the regulative, and whatever unique voice the text has is made derivative of its more basic culture-forming capacity. As much as this is the case, the institutional hermeneutic he espouses stands in tension with the Christological hermeneutic that emerged in Part One.
Yet this does not necessarily imply that we must disregard Jenson’s insights. As I will argue in chapter 4, the way forward is not to abandon the institutional dimensions of hermeneutical space but to reframe them in a way that avoids onesidedness.

*Underlying Ecclesiological Distortions*

The first step toward this reframing requires that we address the ecclesiological distortions underlying the hermeneutical. The problem becomes especially evident when we consider the way Jenson relates the agency of Christ to the agency of the community. “Whether the head speaks or the members, it is the one Christ who speaks.” For him, in other words, the one agent of the divine address is the community that Christ is. But if Christ does not speak “except by his body,” as Jenson maintains, who speaks to the body? In what sense can Christ confront, challenge, or reform the community? Jenson rightly acknowledges this as a potential weakness in his theology; he thus suggests that God’s word “always…contrives somehow to be an ‘external’ word, a word that cannot be absorbed into the hearer’s subjectivity.” Much hinges on this ambiguous “somehow.” Rather than flowing from the logic of his theology, he must simply posit this claim. And if this “somehow” does not touch ground and shape hermeneutical practices, one wonders how much weight it actually carries.

The deeper ecclesiological problem, therefore, is that Jenson provides no basis for Christ’s externality to the community, no means by which to establish critical leverage between the Lord and his people. The danger lurking within his historical-institutional logic, to state the matter baldly, is

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75 Ibid., 275, emphasis added.
that the unique and singular presence of Jesus recedes from view. And the reason for this, I argue, is that he conflates two modes of thinking—the institutional and the Christological. By making Christ historically available in the structures, practices, and language of the church, his theology makes it virtually impossible to distinguish the Risen One himself from the institution that bears his presence. Christ recedes from view in this account not because he is distant but because he is so indistinguishably near, not because his presence is unpredictably eventful but because he is so statically at hand. \textsuperscript{76} The church struggles to see Christ the way a person might struggle to see her own face. The historical-institutional elements of ecclesial space determine the Christological, and Christ is thereby made contingent upon the institution. One cannot confront him except by its structures.

But notice here that this ecclesiological error and the hermeneutical distortions it breeds are not a function of the institution \textit{per se} but of Jenson’s tendency to collapse Christ into it. This holds open the possibility, as I explore more fully in chapter 4, of upholding the institutional dimensions of scriptural hermeneutics without needing to adopt Jenson’s entire vision. In a similar manner, the weakness of his hermeneutic is not a matter of his revisionary metaphysic \textit{per se}. Rather than being the source of the problem, his revisionary metaphysic poses a particular question—where now is Christ’s body?—which he answers by conflating Christ with his community. It is not the metaphysic itself that leads him to exaggerate the church’s institutional dimensions, but his response to its question.

\textsuperscript{76} See Gunton, “Towards an Eschatology of Church Membership.” In this article, Gunton interacts with Richard B. Hays, \textit{First Corinthians} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997). In this work, Hays notes that according to Paul, the Eucharist is an act of memory “until he comes”—that is, the very logic of the Eucharist is predicated not simply on Jesus’ presence to the community but on his \textit{absence} (199).
Under the force of this logic, institutional structures bear a great burden. They are tasked with preserving the church’s identity as it traverses the strange eschatological detour between ascension and parousia. Recall that for Jenson, the church’s identity during this time is as threatened as any other community’s. This is a startling claim. One might expect him to suggest that Christ graciously guides the community as it journeys toward the eschaton. One might expect him to suggest, in other words, that the church’s relationship to the Risen One is such that it is not just like any other community. But in his concern to safeguard ecclesial identity, Jenson instead reduces the church to a species of a more basic genus. The church becomes generic.

At this point, Jenson would likely push back. He offers a subtle nuance that attempts to uphold some semblance of difference between Christ and his people: “The church is the body of Christ for the world and for her members in that she is constituted a community by the verbal and ‘visible’ presence to her of that same body of Christ.” In this sense, we encounter a divine presence within the church that is not identical to it. This presence, for Jenson, is Eucharistic. “The body of Christ is at once his sacramental presence within the church’s assembly…and is the church-community herself to the world and her members.” The objectivity of Christ is found in the bread and cup. For Jenson, the elements are Christ’s availability to the community, even as the community is itself Christ’s availability to the world. On this account, Christians span the gap between them and their Lord precisely by moving toward the table.

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78 Ibid., 168.
Does this notion of Eucharistic objectivity uphold the freedom and personhood of the risen Christ? Does it account for Jesus’ singularity? As some critics have noted, what Jenson offers here is at best a strained account of Christ’s otherness.80 While he attempts to distinguish Christ’s presence to the church from Christ’s presence to the world as the church, he frequently resorts to language that stresses identity, thereby blurring whatever subtle distinction he had achieved. This is evident, for example, when he equates God’s Spirit with the church’s spirit: “A community’s spirit is the liveliness that blows through it, the freedom in which it is more than the sum of its parts…It is the church’s founding miracle that her communal spirit is identically the Spirit that the personal God is and has.”81 At one and the same time, he attempts to uphold the otherness of Christ to the community by means of the objectivity of the Eucharistic elements while also stressing the identical nature of communal spirit and Holy Spirit. This is ambiguous at best.

To sum up the argument to this point, Jenson’s conflationary logic excessively elevates the significance of the church as an institution. To be in the church is to be in Christ in the fullest sense, such that salvation is tantamount to church membership. Whereas traditional theology allows for a gap between the two, often by positing divine election as the ultimate ground of salvation, Jenson asserts straightforwardly that “baptism is the Father’s giving of sheep into the Son’s fold.”82 The process by which one enters the church is itself God’s election. In the end, Jenson’s thinking remains radically historical. No invisible church lies behind the visible, no eternal election transcends the temporal act of entering the church, and, ultimately, no Christ exists in distinction from the

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80 As John Webster rightly notes, this is, at best, a strained account of Christ’s otherness to the church and an “emergency measure” that does not adequately account for the singularity of the Risen One. John Webster, God Without Measure, Vol. 1, 186.


82 Ibid., 178.
community that is his body. As I have shown, this radically historicist orientation dovetails into a scriptural hermeneutic. Since no metaphysical entity undergirds the historical institution, the structures of diachronic continuity must bear an excessively heavy load. They must ward off the identity-compromising threats the church encounters as it navigates time. The danger lurking in this logic is that the institutional dimensions of the community become enlarged beyond their capacity, serving to guarantee the church’s identity and establish Christ’s presence—things only the Risen One himself can rightly accomplish. Taken seriously, this logic fosters a radically insular hermeneutical posture. Reading Scripture requires one to focus inward on the community and to trust one’s inherited cultural resources instead of directing attention to Christ and trusting in his faithfulness. As I will attempt to show, however, we can construe institutional space in a way that rejects this competitive logic and that treats institutional resources not as a replacement for Christ himself but as an aspect of our attention to him.

**Naming the Problem: Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church**

Jenson’s tendency to conflate Christ and the institution obviously differs from the Bonhoefferian vision of discipleship that began to emerge in chapter 2. Indeed, Bonhoeffer’s discipleship motif stands in explicit tension to ecclesiology that onesidedly stress the nearness of Christ to his community. For Bonhoeffer, this was no mere theoretical quibble. A concrete form of this threat became existentially relevant for Bonhoeffer as he participated in the Church Struggle. As his critique of “religion” in his prison writings reveals, he perceived grave Christological dangers lurking within the Confessing Church’s otherwise noble attempt to resists the tumultuous social and political conditions it faced in Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer came to the perhaps counterintuitive belief that an overdone concern to preserve the church’s identity and guard its inherited structures
actually compromised its witness. I suggest that listening to Bonhoeffer in this regard can shed light on Jenson’s account of hermeneutical space and point the way toward integrating the church’s institutional and Christological dimensions.

Several features characterize Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion. Here I will only focus on two, for these most helpfully expose the dangers of onesidedly institutional logic. Bonhoeffer claims that, *inter alia*, the “religious” posture (1) prioritizes ecclesial preservation as the ultimate good and (2) reduces ecclesial faithfulness to doctrinal purity. In Bonhoeffer’s judgment, both tendencies prevent the church from discerning and participating in Christ’s work in the world. The religious posture can inquire into the identity of the church, but it struggles to ask Bonhoeffer’s famous question: “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?”

From prison, Bonhoeffer was particularly attuned to the reality of a world “come of age.” This obviously posed acute questions for Christian life and identity. Similar to the way Jenson responds to the lack of genuine Christian education today and MacIntyre laments the onset of the new dark ages, Bonhoeffer and many of his contemporaries within the Confessing Church recognized that the formation of faithful Christian identity required deliberate institutional efforts. His Finkenwalde experiment represents his most unique attempt thereof. But as much as he recognized the importance of this task, he also perceived the risks present within it.

The Confessing Church was a broad and multifaceted reality. By the time Bonhoeffer wrote his theological letters from prison in 1944, it had effectively failed. As he reflects back over the movement, he observes its key weaknesses. Even the 1934 Barmen Declaration, a significant theological achievement in its own right, had become ingredient within the church’s unfaithfulness.

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83 For more on the nature of the Confessing Church, see Victoria J. Barnett’s excellent study, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest against Hitler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
Facing the threat of doctrinal compromise, some were tempted to double down on Barmen’s verbal formula. Bonhoeffer saw that this posture, though seemingly bold, could actually become self-serving; a supposedly challenging set of Christological conceptualities could correspond to a safe way of life. Fearful of doctrinal contamination, the church was tempted, Bonhoeffer claims, to entrench itself within ecclesial walls, to retreat into an isolated form of Christian existence in which there is no “no risk taking for others.”

One might think that the grave threat of Nazi ideology would license, at least for a time, a form of sectarianism aimed at “conservative restoration.” As I will show below when I examine Bonhoeffer’s account of the “arcane discipline,” there is some truth in this. Yet Bonhoeffer consistently refuses to slide into onesided modes of thinking. The allure of restoration led many Christians astray, producing a cor curvum in se writ large across the church itself.

“Our church, which has been fighting in these years for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to…the world,” Bonhoeffer writes. In prioritizing its own survival, the church had forgotten about its more fundamental call to remain faithful to Jesus and follow after him.

Bonhoeffer thus raises his most stinging critique: from a posture predicated on ecclesial survival, “Jesus disappears from view.” With eyes on itself the church became unable to inquire into the whereabouts of Jesus. The church became a fearful space, one that operates from a posture of preservation rather than a posture of faith. In this sense, the task of ecclesial maintenance works at cross-purposes with the logic of discipleship. There is, of course, partial truth in this posture; the

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84 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 500, 502.
85 Ibid., 429.
86 Ibid., 389.
87 Ibid., 500, emphasis added.
church must attend to the authenticity of its identity as it also seeks to follow Christ. But contrary to those he criticized, Bonhoeffer inverts these priorities. He recognizes, in other words, that the church achieves its identity not through practices of preservation but when it seeks to stand with Christ—“The church is only the church when it is there for others.”88 Instead of being reduced to an ecclesial cause, faithfulness requires the church to pursue Jesus and thereby stand with him “in the center of the village.”89

This brings us back to Jenson. Bonhoeffer would have us believe that the process of reading Scripture becomes hermeneutically significant not merely because we read with the proper “critical theory” (i.e., the creed, as Jenson claims), not merely because readers have been adequately catechized, and not merely because we read with a tradition-based rationality—the process of reading becomes significant because Christ is communicatively gracious, calling us to follow after him.

Whereas Bonhoeffer’s account of Christ correlates with a willed vulnerability vis-à-vis the revealing God and an array hermeneutical practices that follow suit, Jenson’s account threatens to reinforce prior commitments. It is perhaps unsurprising that practices such as confession of sin, repentance, and prayer—so vital to Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutic—sparsely appear in Jenson’s. Lying behind all of this are differing visions of Jesus’ personhood. Without an alertness to Christ’s ongoing freedom and particularity, the church is tempted toward a hermeneutic characterized by “radical horizontality” in which “interpretation very quickly turns into an advancement of ideologies.”90

88 Ibid., 503.
89 Ibid., 480, 367.
Without the necessary critical leverage between Christ’s word and our reading, the ecclesial optic operative in Jenson and others serves merely to fund “cultural circularity.”

To be sure, there is value in this posture. Those within the church have good reason to read Scripture in light of inherited knowledge. Yet even as we rightly acknowledge doctrine’s hermeneutical significance, we recognize, as Barth pithily reminds us, that Christology has “neither words nor a voice.” By blurring the distinction between Christ and community, ecclesial readers are tempted to confuse Christ—a living person—with Christology—the church’s teaching about that person. To borrow Kathryn Tanner’s language, we risk putting “human ideas about God in the place that only God should fill in the Christian life.” When we de-vocalize Christ by reducing his agency to ongoing institutional structures, we are tempted to fill the silence. God’s own talk recedes as the church’s talk about God grows loud.

I certainly do not mean to equate Jenson’s overall theological vision with the conservative factions within the Confessing Church. In many ways, he resonates with Bonhoeffer’s criticism of religion. I am claiming, however, that his hermeneutical posture mirrors theirs in key ways, particularly as an overblown anxiety about ecclesial preservation forestalls the ability to attend to the singular identity and action of Jesus. This posture has the benefit of buttressing the church’s institutional identity. But it comes at a price. The stability of a diachronically continuous culture is

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93 Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 126.

94 For example, Jenson, like Bonhoeffer, would readily challenge the necessity of metaphysics as a presupposition for religion and the notion that religion is primarily individualistic and inward. See Bonhoeffer *DBWE* 8, 362-363.
purchased at the expense of the destabilizing presence of the Risen One. If the error that lurks within theologies of the word is that the church vanishes behind the word, the danger here is precisely the opposite. In both cases—Christ without a church or a church without Christ—we lose the fundamental logic of the discipleship motif.

The way forward requires that we continue to affirm the asymmetrical unity between Christ and his people. We need an agile ecclesiological imagination that at once upholds both the essential unity between the two as well as Christ’s utter out-ahead-ness. As we have seen, each side of this tension suggests a particular posture and a particular account of hermeneutical practices. The task of imaginative joining requires that we maintain both sides of the tension without falling into onesided patterns that distort the hermeneutical process.

**Conclusion**

In my analysis of Webster in chapter 1 and of Jenson in this chapter I implied that their ecclesiological, and thus hermeneutical, imaginations derive from underlying theological and metaphysical commitments. For both, scriptural hermeneutics must have proper dogmatic location, which means that the doctrine of God shapes their accounts of faithful reading. As much as this is the case, a neat synthesis between the two is obviously impossible. Yet I hope to show that some form of mediation is both desirable and feasible. In Part One I invoked Bonhoeffer’s account of God’s promeity in Christ as a means of tempering otherworldly accounts of divine being. I suggest that Bonhoeffer can function similarly in Part Two, but to the opposite effect. Though his vision of God’s historical life resonates with Jenson’s revisionary metaphysic in certain ways, Bonhoeffer remains utterly committed to God’s concrete otherness, which for Bonhoeffer is actualized in the out-ahead-ness of the Risen One. Jesus is both with and ahead of his community. The danger of a
classical vision (especially as it emerges in Webster’s account of the *creatura verbi*) is that it underplays the former; the danger of a revisionist account (especially as it emerges in Jenson’s notion of the historical institution) is that it underplays the latter.

Hence it is important to note that even as Bonhoeffer has helped reveal the weaknesses in Jenson, I do not intend to place the latter’s institutional hermeneutic at odds with the former’s Christological hermeneutic. The goal instead is an account of the institutional and Christological elements of the church that coexist in ordered unity. Given a Christological depiction of the ultimate context of interpretation, how can the institutional dimensions of the church contribute constructively to the hermeneutical enterprise? Can we uphold the hermeneutical significance of the structures of continuity without requiring them to maintain the church’s identity? Can we continue to endorse the hermeneutical insights that have emerged in Jenson’s account of the institution without his also endorsing the move toward conflation inherent in his thinking? By distinguishing his institutional logic from his conflationary tendencies and by noting the difference between his revisionary metaphysic and his use of the body of Christ metaphor, I have implied that we can.

To this end, I seek in chapter 4 to emphasize both the church’s continuous identity in history and the irreducible particularity of the Risen One. In specifically ecclesiological terms, I aim to think of the church simultaneously as the creature of the word and a historical institution. More specifically, I ground the institution in an account of Christ’s resurrected particularity. By framing institutional space in this manner, I suggest that becoming incorporated into the tradition does not insulate one within the institutional past but frees one to embrace new challenges and situations in a posture of openness, confidence, and creativity. Faithful reading therein issues not primarily in the maintenance of cultural identity but in an ability to to call upon, discern, and participate in Jesus’s
life in history—tasks which always precede and ground the church’s ongoing reception of its identity.
Chapter 4: Bonhoeffer’s Institutional Imagination

In this chapter, I engage Bonhoeffer at the respective poles of his career. As a young doctoral student, he theorized the relationship between the church’s empirical and essential forms. Almost two decades later, he witnessed a world “come of age.” His early theory was thereby put to the test. What precisely did the church inherit from its past? What was necessary? What was contingent? From prison he came to see that the empirical forms that had characterized the church in Germany for generations would no longer suffice for Christian faithfulness. He thus embarked on a creative, even if short-lived, process of ecclesiological reflection. Like Jenson, he affirms the institutional nature of the church and certain institutional practices that sustain ecclesial culture and situate traditioned knowers within it. Yet he came to see that in this new, mature context the church’s institutional inheritance could no longer carry value in itself. Hence, he frames institutional practices differently and directs them toward different ends. Rather than ensuring faithfulness or guaranteeing ecclesial preservation, the inheritance orients the community toward Christ, the ground of its identity.

Sanctorum Communio

Bonhoeffer’s account of the relationship between the church’s institutional and Christological dimensions first emerges in *Sanctorum Communio*. In this, his first dissertation, he aims

\footnote{Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 1, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) (hereafter DBWE 1). Regarding the fundamental consistency of Bonhoeffer’s thinking throughout his career, see Clifford J. Green, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” in DBWE 1. Green notes that the notion of “community” that first comes to expression in *Sanctorum Communio* remains foundational to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christian community as it emerges during his Finkenwalde period. Green even suggests that Bonhoeffer’s conception of Jesus from prison as}
to think of the church as simultaneously a theological and sociological entity; one and the same object is open to two modes of analysis. He analyzes the visible, empirical church (Kirche) as a historical institution, while he considers the essential, theological community as the creature of Christ (Gemeinde). The theological and the sociological come together in his famous phrase: “Die Kirche ist Christus als Gemeinde existierend” — the church is Christ existing as community. The essential church that “exists through Christ’s action” is always also a “religious community” with all the concomitant social and empirical markers.

The ground of this two-sidedness is Jesus Christ himself. “The word constitutes the unity between essential and empirical church,” Bonhoeffer claims. This is the case because Christ relates to the community in both a historical and theological manner, both horizontally and vertically. Bonhoeffer suggests, in other words, that the relationship between Christ and the church is ambidextrous; Christ is both “the foundation, the cornerstone” of the community and also a “real presence” to it. The empirical church is the “historical result of the work of Jesus Christ” in the “man for others” owes to this early work. “In light of the foundational role of Sanctorum Communio...one has to be very careful not to interpret some of Bonhoeffer’s later statements as rejections of his early theological work” (7).

2 Green notes that Gemeinde carries a range of meanings and usages in Bonhoeffer’s writing and “therefore presents the most complex translation problem” (“Editors Introduction,” in DBWE 1, 14). “In Bonhoeffer’s most distinctive and fundamental usage in this book, Gemeinde means Christ present as sanctorum communio” (14). Gemeinde functions for Bonhoeffer not generically as “community” but as a theological specification, which is why it would be misleading to translate it with a purely sociological term. Yet Gemeinde must also be distinguished from Kirche, which for Bonhoeffer tends to refer to the empirical church and not necessarily the sanctorum communio. For this reason, Green tends to translate Gemeinde as “church-community.” For Green’s full articulation of Gemeinde in Bonhoeffer, see his Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

3 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1, 137.

4 E.g., Ibid., 216.

5 Ibid., 226.

6 Ibid., 139.
founding the institution. Given the horizontal dimension of Christ’s presence to the community, Bonhoeffer even suggests that the institution itself stands in as Christ’s ongoing visible presence in history. Here his ecclesiology parallels Jenson’s. Yet Christ is also significant for the church in his otherness from it and in his gracious presence to it, as the one who actualizes the church in the present through the Spirit.

Given the historical mode of Christ’s relationship to the community, the church remains open to sociological analysis. “Where wills unite,” Bonhoeffer writes, “a ‘structure’ is created—that is, a third entity, previously unknown, independent of being willed or not willed by the persons who are uniting.” Drawing from Hegel’s “The Philosophy of Spirit,” he refers to this as the community’s “objective spirit.” Because of it, those entering a community experience the community as “something real outside themselves” and as something irreducible to the sheer conglomeration of members. The objective spirit spans the spatial and temporal dimensions of the community, forges historical continuity, and thereby allows the community to persist as one entity through time. Institutional structures and offices play a key role in this process, for they manifest a community’s spirit in history. The similarities with Jenson’s structures of diachronic identity are obvious.

But the difference between the two becomes readily apparent. Whereas Jenson implies, in Hegelian fashion, that the community’s consciousness is God’s Spirit, Bonhoeffer refuses to equate the two. “A complete identification between Christ and the church-community cannot be made,

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7 Ibid., 209.
8 Ibid., 98.
10 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1, 98-99.
since Christ has ascended into heaven.\footnote{Ibid., 140.} In biblical idiom, Bonhoeffer recognizes that the Spirit blows where it will.\footnote{Ibid., 203, 214.} Distinguishing Christ from the institution grants the church an eschatological horizon. Bonhoeffer therefore realizes that on this side of the eschaton the \textit{sanc
torum communio} and the \textit{peccatorum communio} always coexist.\footnote{Ibid., 213.} In history there is no pure church. The church’s present form is not its final form; it remains a community on the way.

Yet this fundamental difference between Christ and his people does not negate the theological importance of the empirical community. Rather than being a mere secular veneer covering a properly theological reality, the church’s objective spirit plays a significant material role in Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology. \textit{“The Holy Spirit uses the objective spirit as a vehicle for its gathering and sustaining social activity.”}\footnote{Ibid., 215.} \textit{“Here it becomes clear,” he continues, “that in order to build the empirical church both Christ and the Holy Spirit make use of the forms of the life of the objective spirit as they exist historically.”}\footnote{Ibid.} The objective spirit not only serves to maintain the church’s diachronic identity (a \textit{“profane”} task, as Bonhoeffer calls it); \textit{it also becomes the means of a divine event.}

According to Bonhoeffer, in other words, the Holy Spirit uses the objective spirit to actualize the community of Christ in the present. This implies that the relationship between the two is not fixed. The \textit{“church can in its essence be understood only as a divine act,”} Bonhoeffer contends.\footnote{Ibid., 277. In \textit{Act and Being} (DBWE 2), Bonhoeffer employs a similar line of thinking when dealing with the relationship between theology and preaching. \textit{“Theology is the memory of the church,”} he claims (130). It is the \textit{“word of the person of Christ, which is preserved as something that exists in the historical church…It stands between past and present.”}} Even as the community necessarily possesses visible features in history, the gratuity of

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{Ibid., 140.}
\footnote{Ibid., 203, 214.}
\footnote{Ibid., 213.}
\footnote{Ibid., 215.}
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\footnote{Ibid., 277. In \textit{Act and Being} (DBWE 2), Bonhoeffer employs a similar line of thinking when dealing with the relationship between theology and preaching. \textit{“Theology is the memory of the church,”} he claims (130). It is the \textit{“word of the person of Christ, which is preserved as something that exists in the historical church…It stands between past and present.”}}
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this event precludes the Holy Spirit from being objectified as an empirical feature of communal life. To echo an important point Bonhoeffer makes elsewhere, the church of Christ is visible but not empirically available. The objective spirit and the array of institutional practices that constitute it become the means by which Christ, in the freedom of his life as the risen Lord, exists as church-community.

This is the case in spite of the sinfulness, imperfection, and—on occasion—downright unattractiveness of the church’s empirical features. While sarcastically acknowledging the “deadly boredom of a public visible assembly in which one risks sitting in front of a narrow-minded preacher and next to lifeless faces,” Bonhoeffer nevertheless claims that “the assembly of believers remains our mother.” Gathering together as an assembly, like other ecclesial practices, “is not simply an entrenched traditional habit.” As an empirical activity it carries a divine commission: “It is in fact this empirical church in whose womb grows God’s sacred treasure, God’s own church-community.”

future preaching” (130). He admits that the notion of theology as institutional memory seems “indistinguishable from profane thinking” (130). In and of itself, institutional memory remains lifeless apart from Christ’s presence. It is of value “only where the living person of Christ is itself present and can destroy this existing thing or acknowledge it” (131). “The community of faith knows that making general pronouncements makes sense only where Christ confirms it in each instance” (131). Only when “Christ himself speaks these words [of dogma] hic et nunc are they really about God” (131).

17 Bonhoeffer worries that various forms of Christianity—e.g., Anabaptism, Pietism, Kant’s secularized concept of the Kingdom of God, the religious-socialist Youth Movement—risk undialectically equating the Holy Spirit with the objective spirit of the community, thereby claiming “to have the Realm of God finally present not only by faith but by sight, no longer veiled within the strange forms of a Christian church, but clearly manifested in the morality and holiness of human beings” (DBWE 1, 222).

18 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1, 228.

19 Ibid., 227.

20 Ibid., 222.
Two institutional practices are particularly relevant in this task: the sermon and the sacraments.\textsuperscript{21} In fact, Bonhoeffer believes that the concrete function of the empirical church lies precisely in its ability to maintain them, not because they hold value in and of themselves but because they direct the community toward Christ and thereby facilitate a gracious encounter. The horizontal serves the vertical. Individuals commit themselves to the historical-institutional community “because they accept that God wills to speak in the empirical church” and because they trust that God has given the church the means and offices by which this speaking can occur.\textsuperscript{22} “The objective spirit, fraught with so much contingency, imperfection, and sin, nevertheless has the promise that it can preach the word of God; it becomes the bearer of the social activity of the Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{23} Precisely as the creatura verbi, the church exists as an institution in history, which means that institutional practices direct the church toward a presence not reducible to or derivable from its social features. In this way, Bonhoeffer upholds an asymmetrical unity, valuing the institution without sliding into institutionalism.

As I explore more fully below, this carries implications for scriptural hermeneutics. Just as Christ relates to the church in a dual manner, so too Scripture functions in two ways, in both an empirical and theological sense. Given the unity between objective spirit and Holy Spirit, the text carries a regulative capacity and an ability to serve the community’s diachronic identity. In line with Bonhoeffer’s sociological mode of analysis, the Bible exists as a historical text within the empirical institution. Just as all communities have a charter (written or not), so too the church has its canon.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 226.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 230.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 233, emphasis original.
At the same time, because of the *distinction* between the objective spirit and the Holy Spirit, because the two can never be fixed undialectically, the text also functions in a sacramental capacity as the means by which the Holy Spirit addresses the community and draws it into Christ’s ongoing activity.

*Letters and Papers from Prison*

Taken at face value, Bonhoeffer’s famous claim that the church is Christ-existing-as-community might seem to imply that institutional structures suffice for producing Christian faithfulness. In *Sanctorum Communio*, as we have just seen, a nuanced yet important distinction prevents this reading. Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology would continue to develop. In particular, the onset of the church struggle compels him to further grapple with the distinction between the institutional and Christological dimensions of the church. As the acute faithlessness of the church in Germany became apparent, ecclesiological asymmetry took on increased importance. Without severing the connection between the church’s empirical life and its conformity to Christ, he became freshly attuned to the importance of the gap between the two.

This gap provided space for the concrete and particularist Christology of *Discipleship* to emerge. In this sense, the discipleship motif represents the maturation of his earlier insights. In *Sanctorum Communio* he argues that Christians commit themselves to the empirical form of the church “not merely out of gratitude for the gift they have already received” but because they “are driven by a desire to receive it ever anew, to be born anew again and again.”24 In the terms of discipleship, the

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24 Ibid., 228.
institutional structures become means by which Jesus’ followers encounter their Lord and are daily called to continue following after him.

This sensibility becomes even more apparent in his prison writings. From his cell, Bonhoeffer reflects on society’s maturation (die Mündigkeit), its coming of age. For generations, the church’s institutional structures had been woven into the fabric of European culture, but in this new age it was unclear what their future entailed. This dilemma compelled him toward fresh ecclesiological exploration. In many ways, what emerges in prison is quite creative—the church should sell its property, find new methods for training ministers, pay pastors congregationally, and distance itself from governmental authorities. At the same time, however, certain components of the church must remain consistent. Bonhoeffer’s constructive vision emerges within the context of this tension.

In his theological letters from prison, he commonly frames his own thoughts about the nature of the church in reaction to others on offer. He believes that two options in particular must be rejected: the task of the church in the world is not, as some of his contemporaries were advocating, to retreat into a ghetto and inculcate doctrinal and confessional purity. Nor was the task of the church to fight to expand its relevance through methods of apologetic manipulation and religious propaganda. Both tendencies fall prey to the allure of empirically verifiable faithfulness. Both tendencies are mistaken, in other words, in thinking that in the midst of a changing cultural situation the church must fight to uphold its inherited institutional and empirical forms of life.

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25 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 503.
26 Ibid., 428-9.
27 See Ibid., 363, where Bonhoeffer forcefully refers to such tactics as “religious rape.”
In contrast to these options, Bonhoeffer came to believe that vis-à-vis a world come of age, the church must rethink the nature of its public presence and witness—speaking “Christianese” is no longer tantamount to speaking truthfully, and performing inherited rituals may in fact be an act of faithlessness. To attempt to do by human force and cleverness what only God can do is to turn “revelation” into a religious object. Even so, the church obviously cannot abandon its structures and practices. The question becomes: how can the church’s empirical form serve its essential identity?

The notion of the “arcane discipline” is central to his answer. As used within the early church, this discipline distinguished between the sermon, which was often open to the public, and a set of practices carried out in private (e.g., reciting the creed, confessing sin, saying the Lord’s Prayer, and participating in the Eucharist). By distinguishing the church’s public and private activities, the arcane discipline provided the time and space necessary for the formation of a distinctly Christian pattern of life in the midst of a largely non-Christian context.

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28 Bonhoeffer refers to this as “positivism of revelation.” See, e.g., Ibid., 429. For more on this, see Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 882-3.

29 The precise meaning of this phrase in Bonhoeffer’s thinking is disputed. Two strands of interpretation are available: the traditional and the revisionary. The traditional is evident, for example, in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 880ff and John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 254. The revisionary is found in John D. Matthews, “Responsible Sharing of the Mystery,” in *Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1999), 114-126. Traditionally, the arcane discipline refers to the practice of preserving or guarding the secrets of the faith from public profanation, e.g., by reserving the Eucharist or the creed for the select faithful. Matthews suggests, however, that Bonhoeffer meant to substantiate the word “arcani.” On this reading, Bonhoeffer meant something like, “The discipline or practice of sharing the mystery faithfully,” i.e., of translating it into culturally acceptable idiom. Here I follow the traditional interpretation, which is generally more well attested and which, in my estimate, makes more sense of Bonhoeffer’s driving concerns in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Importantly for the traditional reading, the arcane discipline was an important feature of Bonhoeffer’s thinking earlier in his career and not merely a product of his prison imagination; see, e.g., DBWE 11, 313ff; DBWE 12, 213; and DBWE 14, 551-558. At Finkenwalde Bonhoeffer notes the importance of preserving the mysteries entrusted to the church. He notes that in the Protestant church the only thing resembling the arcane discipline is admission to the Lord’s Supper, which, he claims “represents a final, weak remnant of the arcane discipline” (556).

30 See Jones and Fowl, *Reading in Communion*, 33.
appropriating the discipline, Bonhoeffer implies that even a “non-religious” posture toward the world is not an excuse to discard the tradition. In this sense, the arcane discipline functions as the counterpoint to non-religious Christianity Bonhoeffer espouses from prison. As Eberhard Bethge suggests, “While Bonhoeffer developed his ideas on the nonreligious interpretation of Christianity in a world come of age, he never considered abandoning his connection with the traditional words and customs of the church.”31 He recognizes, in other words, that even as certain traditional practices had lost social credibility in a new cultural situation, some must be retained and sheltered against profanation.32

In this particular sense, Bonhoeffer places special importance upon the church as a historical-institutional entity. But a key question remains: why? Why is it important to preserve the church in this way? Why not abandon the tradition and rebuild Christianity from the ground up? Here his thinking remains consistent with what emerged in Sanctorum Communio. Beyond simply maintaining the identity of the institution, the arcane discipline functions in a profoundly Christological manner.

Bethge summarizes it well: “In the arcuum Christ takes everyone who really encounters him by the shoulder, turning them around to face their fellow human beings and the world.”33 It functions, in short, as the institutionally mediated means of placing the community in position to encounter Christ and be called into his ongoing work. The discipline provides space to nurture a way of thinking and seeing appropriate to the resurrection, a modus vivendi particular to the community of

32 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 373.
33 Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 883.
the Risen One. Ecclesial faithfulness, therefore, is something that continually happens as the church opens itself to the presence of Christ, and a traditioned faith tutored by the arcane discipline situates the church for this event. To borrow Bonhoeffer’s language from another writing, it becomes the means by which the community daily orients itself to the Crucified One and allows itself to be called into conversion by him.\(^{34}\)

For this reason, the arcane discipline is not a withdrawal from the world, and its solution to the struggles of the day is not the mere formation of a counterculture, as tempting as this option must have seemed. For sure, the task of sustaining the church’s historical-institutional dimensions requires the church to attend to its unique culture, and certain practices constitute the church as a distinctive polity. But this culture and this distinctiveness are not themselves the answer. Rather, they situate the church in relation to the one who is. Christian identity, on this account, is always a gift, never an achievement. The value of the church’s historical-institutional dimensions lies not in itself but in Christ’s faithfulness to his people. What for Jenson are structures of diachronic identity function for Bonhoeffer as structures of reception, the means by which the community situates itself to receive its identity from the Risen One ever anew.

Bonhoeffer recognized, in other words, that in order to live faithfully the church at all times must ask, Who is Christ for us today? In a turbulent cultural moment, this question carries particular challenges. It may seem more pressing to divert energy elsewhere, perhaps toward the task of preservation or apologetics, two options Bonhoeffer rejected. At precisely this point the arcane discipline proves its usefulness. Given Bonhoeffer’s account of the arcanum, the task of developing tradition-based rationality aims at fostering a particular lived orientation. The telos of formation is

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\(^{34}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 16, 41.
Christological. The church’s process of forming traditioned knowers remains fundamentally secular if it asks only about the community’s relationship to its past, in which case its purpose would lie within itself. The genuinely theological character of this community arises when it asks about its living Lord—who is he for us today? Thus, as I explore more fully below, the well-formed community is one that embodies a posture of openness and orientation toward Christ and that thereby exercises modes of knowing particular to the ongoing journey of discipleship.

A Christological Account of Historical-Institutional Practices

In chapter 3 I examined the hermeneutical significance of the institutional structures of continuity. Here in chapter 4 I have begun to complexify this picture by filtering Jenson’s institutional account of the church through a Bonhoefferian lens. Jenson’s problem, I have argued, is that his revisionary metaphysic poses a question—where now is Christ’s body?—that he answers by hyper-valuing the institution. Hermeneutically, this problem takes shape as the tendency to over-burden the practices that form traditioned rationality. But I have also shown that these dangers are not inherent to an institutional hermeneutic as such, nor do they necessarily derive from a revisionary metaphysic. This qualification holds open the possibility of reframing the institutional dimensions of hermeneutics in a more balanced manner while continuing to emphasize Jesus’ singular particularity and promeity as the man from Nazareth.

I have suggested that the discipleship motif points to this possibility. The two snapshots from respective poles of Bonhoeffer’s life reveal a distinctly Christological account of the institution. Bonhoeffer gets to the heart of the matter: “The empirical church-community, office, and assembly belong together…[because] God wants to walk with God’s holy people on a path that leads through
the midst of history.”35 Here, in one statement, Bonhoeffer joins the empirical and essential church—and does so within the framework of discipleship. The church exists as a socio-historical and institutional entity precisely because Christ calls his people to follow after him as they journey through history.

Hermeneutics and Christ’s Livelihood

The first step toward unpacking the hermeneutical implications that follow is to ask Bonhoeffer the same question that trips up Jenson: Where does he locate the Risen One? Here Bonhoeffer’s imagination remains dexterous. Given Jesus’ agile unpredictability in the post-resurrection stories, Bonhoeffer refuses to settle for an answer that would restrict Christ’s movement. While some theologians proffer the ascension as a means securing Christ’s location, Bonhoeffer recognizes that even though he has ascended, Jesus has not vanished into the heavenly realms. He continues to stride through history, fulfilling his promise to be with his disciples until the end of the age. Because Christ is with his followers in the independence of his being, he remains totally free and irreducibly other. So, where is Jesus? He is leading the church toward the kingdom. Bonhoeffer would answer, in other words, by pointing to the church while simultaneously pointing ahead of it.

This latter move introduces a note of instability into Christian theology. While Christ can certainly be trusted to be with the church, he refuses to be tethered therein. “It is not a church organization that defines Christ,” Green writes, summarizing Bonhoeffer, “but Christ who defines

35 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1, 236. Even at this early age, the discipleship motif is key to Bonhoeffer’s logic.
As the out-ahead one, he retains the capacity to surprise. In terms of scriptural interpretation, this means that the church remains open to the unexpected, admitting that “the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word.” \(^{37}\) Understood in this way, the text’s “surplus of meaning” ultimately derives from the mobile freedom of Christ himself. The church returns again and again to Scripture not only to be reminded of something it may have forgotten, but also in search of new insights that will sustain it on the way. The church returns again and again to Scripture, that is, because Christ continues to work, continues to move, and continues to speak.

The notion of textual surplus can be frightening. One of the most alluring features of an institutionalized account of hermeneutical space is that it provides the basis for sorting through the text’s surplus in an orderly and predictable manner. T.F. Torrance refers to this allure as the “temptation of orthodoxy.” The temptation, he warns, is to achieve epistemic stability at the expense of Christ himself, reducing the truth of Christ to an object that can be easily regulated and preserved. \(^{38}\) There is certainly something valid animating this temptation, for the truths of the faith were “once for all delivered” (Jude 3, RSV) and need to be handed on with care. But the past tense of “delivered once for all” should not obscure the sense in which the life of Christ is ongoing. Jesus himself defies our longing for epistemic mastery over him. The danger is that the fixity of tradition renders Christ’s unique personal agency unnecessary—what he would do as a living agent in the present has been accomplished ahead of time by the institution itself.

\(^{36}\) Green, “Editors Introduction,” in DBWE 1, 15.


While it certainly destabilizes knowledge, subordinating the church’s institutional dimensions to its Christological is not an excuse to abandon all notions of ecclesial consistency. Rather, it calls us to reimagine the type of consistency the church possesses. Again we take our cues from Christ. As a living person who acts in total freedom, his life is necessarily marked by unpredictability. At the same time, however, he acts in continuity with himself. The one who lives freely ahead of the church, calling it into being, is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Hence, even as it lacks static stability, the church need not fear anarchic chaos. As a creature of Christ’s call, it shares in his consistency. Rather than possessing the selfsame permanence of an object that unflinchingly perdures through time, the church in history is marked by the unity of a life.

Accordingly, when the church recounts its own history it engages in a distinctly Christological task, what Yoder calls the task of tracing “the sameness of Jesus across the generations.” Given Christ’s freedom, this task of tracing his life requires more than mere repetition. James Cone suggests that the church must hold Christ’s “wasness” and “isness” in creative tension: “We do not simply ask, ‘What would Jesus do?’…We ask, ‘What is he doing now?’” Given Christ’s personal continuity, the answer to the latter question emerges from the former even thought it is not reducible to it. In this sense, the historical-institutional inheritance helps the church navigate the gap between Christ’s past history and contemporary livelihood. The act of tracing the past reveals signposts—touchstones—reminding the church of who Christ has been and thus who he will be.


This further suggests that although the act of remembrance cannot secure faithfulness in and of itself, it can familiarize the church with its Lord. Memory of Christ’s past speech attunes the church to the frequency of his dialect. Or, to put this same insight in biblical idiom, the sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice. In this sense, traditioned knowledge functions like personal awareness. The historical-institutional past carries hermeneutical value because Christ speaks from the continuity of his person and because his people, guided by the Spirit, foster a mode of knowing suitable to this speech. The one who speaks may deliver a new and surprising word, but even in so doing he remains unfailingly himself. As Richard Bauckham therefore suggests, “He may be trusted to be consistent with himself, but he may surprise in the ways he proves consistent with himself.”

As paradoxical as it may sound, when the church reads Scripture it can expect to have its expectations undone, can anticipate being surprised. In the midst of textual abundance the church need not fear hermeneutical disarray, for Scripture is bounded by the stability of Christ himself.

**Imagining Christ**

This refocuses the hermeneutical task. Jenson claims that the church, on the basis of its institutional identity, knows what God will say when God speaks through Scripture. I have contended that this is an overblown account of the institution that leads to interpretive overconfidence. I suggest, on the contrary, that even if the church does not know what God will say, it knows who God is. Such confidence is properly placed. This nuance may seem nitpicky. But when

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it comes to the posture and practices of reading, it carries significant implications. Whereas an overly institutionalized posture equates the formation of a traditioned rationality with hermeneutical faithfulness, I am arguing that such formation functions penultimately; it cannot secure God’s word, but it can put the church in a position to listen for and discern it anew.

I suggest that this gap between what and who opens space for a certain mode of knowing and the hermeneutical practices that enable it. In particular, I propose that the recent turn toward “imagination” as a theological category points in a helpful direction. I argue, in short, that when we locate historical-institutional modes of knowing within Christological space, a particular account of hermeneutical imagination rightly comes to characterize the church’s reading of Scripture.

When properly deployed, the concept of imagination allows the church to navigate the fine line between the temptation of orthodoxy and the threat of theological anarchy. To be sure, imagination is integral to Christian epistemology more generally, for the risen Christ leads his community into a kingdom we now see only dimly. This eschatological directionality necessitates a mode of perception not limited to the immediately visible and empirically available. In theological terms, hope is epistemologically consequential. In specifically hermeneutical terms, hope takes shape as imagination.

More specifically, Luke Timothy Johnson implies that my driving question in this project—what does it mean to read within the church?—calls for imagination as a key answer. He notes that the “historical-critical hegemony” that loosed the text from its ecclesial home simultaneously worked to suppress the role of imagination in the process of understanding. Garrett Green expands on Johnson’s insight; instead, of the “picture-language of religious Vorstellung,” modern hermeneutics

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prized “the translucent purity of the *Begriff.*” Scientific reason, not ecclesial imagination, became the ideal mode of engaging Scripture. Yet as much as the aforementioned hegemony has waned, imagination has begun to reemerge as a hermeneutical category.

Some have referred to this mode of thinking as “traditioned innovation,” a way of creatively navigating the new in light of the old. Kavin Rowe suggests this is a biblical pattern of thinking—not necessarily because the Bible commends it but because the Bible exemplifies it. A pattern of traditioned-innovation is perhaps most obvious in the OT, as editors and redactors in new historical situations responded to inherited texts in innovative ways. But this pattern is evident in the NT as well. The four Gospels exhibit modes of thinking that are simultaneously faithful and creative. Consider also Paul’s own innovative readings of his inherited texts, or the author of Acts, who forges unity between the church and Israel while also representing the distinct newness of a community belonging to a risen messiah.

If this pattern of thinking is integral to the nature of the Bible itself, I am here considering how it might it affect the church’s reading of it. By suggesting the importance of imagination I am not claiming that God exceeds language and that we must be content to know God metaphorically. Likewise, I am not merely reiterating the common claim that all reading is imaginative in that it expands the horizons of our own vision. I am continuing to pursue the hermeneutical logic of the

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45 See, e.g., Jason Byassee, “Theology and Worship,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology*, ed. Mike Higton and Jim Fodor (New York: Routledge, 2015), 204: “Arguably there is no innovation anywhere, inside or outside the Church, without rich tradition; and likewise no tradition kept alive without some form of innovation.”


resurrection. In light of the past, we read Scripture in search of Christ’s address to us today. The gap between the past and present tenses of Christ’s address constitutes the “hermeneutical breathing room” within which imagination can flourish. In this sense, it is precisely the newness of Christ’s voice that necessitates the imaginative engagement with the text.

According to Garrett Green, imagination is the “paradigmatic faculty” that enables one to think in terms of a pattern or model. Though Green himself does not make an explicit connection to discipleship, we can expand on his thinking by noting that Jesus is the church’s definitive model, the paradigm for faithfulness, and the one whose pattern of existence the church strives to emulate. Christ is the image of the invisible God who grounds ecclesial imagination. The imitation of Christ, in other words, is the church’s attempt to re-image Christ’s own image. It is the church’s attempt to think paradigmatically—i.e., imaginatively, as Green suggests—as a means of embodying forth a pattern of action that fits with his. As much as this is the case, the logic of imagination is integral to the logic of discipleship. There can be no imitation without imagination. Rather than a sign that its readings are weak or imperfect, imagination is a necessary aspect of interpretation that aims to catch up to the ongoing life of the living Lord.

Richard Hays adds specificity to this account of hermeneutical imagination. The church “will have to formulate imaginative analogies between the stories told in the texts and the story lived out by

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48 The phrase comes from Garrett Green, Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 135. Here Green draws from Hans Frei: “I would suggest that a good interpretation of a text is one that has ‘breathing space,’ that is to say, one in which no hermeneutic finally allows you to resolve the text—there is something that is left to bother, something that is wrong, something that is not yet interpreted” (Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 162). Here Frei has in mind the gap between literary meaning and historical referent. Though I am redeploying the notion in a slightly different manner—giving priority to God’s voice and not the literary document per se—a similar hermeneutical space emerges, the navigation of which requires a degree of imaginative activity on part of the interpreter.

49 Green, Imagining God, 66ff.

50 Cf., Johnson, “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines,” 15.
our community in a very different historical setting." Hermeneutical faithfulness requires that one renders the unknown—the new challenge or question the church faces today—in light of the known—the biblical witness to the Kingdom. At this point, Jenson’s insights remain important. Hays argues, echoing the notion intratextuality on display in Jenson, that the task of discerning a contemporary word requires the church to place itself within the story. The church must attempt to make sense of its particular hermeneutical moment in light of the larger narrative whole. As Trevor Hart notes, this is precisely what imagination equips one to do: “It is…the faculty which makes sense of things, locating particular bits and pieces within larger patterns, and in so doing goes beyond what is given.”

While much recent work on narrative and imagination proceeds from a literary or philosophical standpoint, James Cone gives these insights a Christological dimension. His *God of the Oppressed*, published in 1975, was at the cutting edge of debates about narrative as a theological category. Though preceding Lindbeck’s influential claims in *The Nature of Doctrine*, Cone strongly endorses an intratextual hermeneutic. He states, for example, that the preacher’s task is to weave the stories of the congregation into the one biblical story: “Through the reading of Scripture…[people] are taken from the present to the past.” In short, the church must imaginatively indwell the story. Yet unlike much of the narrative theology emerging at the time, Cone’s reasoning remains strictly Christological. As with Barth in his famous essay, “The Strange New World within the Bible,”

52 Ibid., 302.
54 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 102, emphasis added.
Cone notes that the scriptural world is a site of encounter, movement, and surprise. The point of indwelling this strange textual world is ultimately to encounter Christ therein.\footnote{In her work, \textit{God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Francesca Aran Murphy wonders if Jenson’s narrative theology undermines this possibility. By strongly accenting the narrative dimensions of the text, Jenson risks portraying a closed world, she claims. Jenson’s move, following Frei, has the benefit of reminding the reader that the point of the text is not to get to another, but it risks presenting Jesus as what Murphy calls a “screened self.” Constrained by the logic of a story, the reader encounters a narrative character who lacks free personality, a storied Jesus who lacks spontaneity, surprise, and extra-textual concreteness. As she states in the introduction to her work, “The presence of Christ to us in narrative theology is like that of a screen actor to a movie-viewer. The screened ‘self’ is both product of a collective imagination and delivered to one. This analogy undermines personality” (4).} And since this Christ is not constrained by the story but continues to reign as Lord of all, the encounter with him necessarily presses one into the web of stories that constitute the present world. We indwell the narrative, but we do not stop there—as Cone contends, the church moves into the text and is “\textit{then thrust back into their contemporary history}.”\footnote{Cone, \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 102, emphasis added.} This constant imaginative movement from first century to present context, from text to world, characterizes narrative imagination in a Christological key.\footnote{Among other things, this account of intratextuality, in contrast to an ecclesiocentric account, leaves open the possibility that one might find resources for faithful reading outside of the church. The movement into the world holds potential to challenge, judge, and expand Christian vision. More on this in chapters 7 and 8.}

\textit{Forming Hermeneutical Imagination}

How does one actually become traditioned in a way that enables ongoing hearing? What account of formation is needed to produce faithful hermeneutical imagination? Richard Hays again points a way forward. He refers to scriptural interpretation as a “complex practice”—here referencing MacIntyre’s famous definition of a practice as a socially established activity with its own standards of excellence.\footnote{Hays, “Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith,” 11. For MacIntyre’s definition of practice, see \textit{After Virtue}, 187.} If the practice of reading is socially established, then the process of being formed for it requires prolonged and intentional participation in the community that constitutes the
practice. It requires the formation of a way of life, a form of embodied wisdom that grows from immersion in the tradition. This account of formation calls to mind Jenson’s institutional ecclesiology. Earlier, I gestured toward the notion of catechesis that coincides with it. Indeed, some type of formal initiation into the tradition is necessary for a church that attempts to live faithfully as such. Yet certain dangers come lurking within this pedagogical vision of the underlying ecclesiology becomes onesided. Here we would do well to listen to Willie Jennings’ warning, particularly as he highlights the pedagogical distortions that follow from an inadequately Christological account of the church:

Christianity is a teaching faith. It carries in its heart the making of disciples through teaching. Yet its pedagogical vision is inside its christological horizon and embodiment, inside its *participatio Christi* and its *imitatio Christi*...[But starting in the colonial period] theology was inverted with pedagogy. Teaching was not envisioned inside discipleship, but discipleship was envisioned inside teaching. 60

According to Jennings, in other words, troubles arise when we invert teaching and following, when the church’s efforts of pedagogical replication trump the ongoing process of Christological imitation. It is precisely the embodied and enacted nature of *imitatio* that thrusts faithfulness beyond the purely cognitive realm, thereby rendering the traditional notion of teaching as transmission pedagogically inadequate.

Though Jennings does not attend specifically to ecclesiological issues, his concerns about overly-pedagogical forms of Christianity map nicely onto my concerns about a onesidedly institutional church. Indeed, a critique of “discipline at the borders” (so important for Jenson) is implicit within his articulation of discipleship. He argues that the inversion of pedagogy and discipleship funds a distorted vision of intellectual and cultural judgment—“hyperevaluation,” as he

calls it—that exerted particularly damaging consequences on the recipients of colonialist instruction and continues to undergird much pedagogical theory today. There is, of course, much more to be said about the effects colonialism has exerted on the theological disciplines. Here I briefly listen to Jennings because he alerts us to the possibility that a strongly institutionalized account of faithfulness, if left unchecked, might work at cross purposes with the formation of the imagination inherent to discipleship. What might it look like if, following Jennings, pedagogy existed within discipleship? What might it mean to make *participatio* and *imitatio* the primary features of formation?

In his work, *Improvisation*, Sam Wells highlights some features of what this might entail. He argues that the structures of tradition constitute the necessary ground from which faithful action grows. As he suggests, one cannot innovate abstractly, for “the future is formed out of the past.”

“Improvisation is not about being spontaneous and witty in the moment” he writes, but requires one to “fit a new action or concept into a larger narrative.” On this reading, incorporation into the tradition remains significant. But, contrary to an inflated pedagogical vision, this account of formation functions instrumentally. Becoming traditioned vis-à-vis the risen Christ is a liberating process. By locating readings within the tradition, the process of formation provides the skills and the foundation upon which improvisation can occur.

Or to put this in Bonhoeffer’s terms: “There is no education without taking discipleship to Christ seriously.” Bonhoeffer explains what he means:

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61 Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004), 148. My only concern with Wells is that his emphasis on developing a way to act as “second nature” implies that the resources necessary for faithfulness are immanently embedded within the tradition itself. Bonhoeffer’s notion of the arcane discipline would helpfully deepen Wells’ vision. The resources we inherit in the tradition situate us in relation to a living Lord who cannot be pinned down in the institutional past. The practical danger, then, is that a strong account of imagination as improvisation might direct attention away from the practices that emerged in chapters 1 and 2.

62 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 539.
Christian education can never be programmatic…It is a matter not of creating a new type of human being, a ‘Christian human being,’ but of the human being with all his ideals, including Christian ideals, *bowing* to the dominion of God and *living in orientation* to God. There are no Christian educational ideals, educational models, but only the call to discipleship at a certain point. It is left to God to shape the person according to God’s likeness.\(^63\)

Bonhoeffer suggests, in other words, that the church’s pedagogical practices are not called to manufacture a particular product. Instead, they strive to hold open a possibility—that one may encounter Christ and be called to follow him. Any sort of visible changes that may accrue along the way result not from pedagogical techniques but from the grace of Christ. To believe that education and formation can produce faithfulness is to render Christ an ideal and not a living person. Practices of formation must therefore leave space for Christ himself.

Framed within the discipleship motif, the livelihood of Jesus renders problematic any project aimed at hyperevaluation. Faithful hermeneutical imagination in the wake of Christ is more an art than a science, more about wisdom than technique. In the wake of Christ, hermeneutical imagination does not lend itself to tidy procedures and is not easily quantifiable. The act of following, not the act of teaching, is primary. This account of hermeneutical training might look something like apprenticeship, the hermeneutical equivalent of Paul’s appeal to “be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (I Cor. 11:1).\(^64\) As *imitatio*, the formation of hermeneutical faithfulness aims at a lived disposition that is at once located within the tradition and yet alert to the imaginative possibilities that discipleship entails. On this reading, teaching is not simply a matter of conveying

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 540, emphasis added.

content and method; it is also, and most importantly, a matter of exemplifying a way of life that is attuned to Jesus and that faithfully searches the text in hopes of hearing his word.

In many ways, Bonhoeffer imagined his Finkenwalde experiment as an attempt to put flesh on this picture of formation. Here he displays that formation is an embodied, communal, and ongoing process. There is a certain thickness to Christian pedagogy when the church is considered simultaneously as both the *creatura verbi* and a historical-institution. Discipleship is something we do with our bodies not just our minds, with imagination not just reason, as communities not just as individuals. Here we anticipate what is to come in Part Three. Bonhoeffer’s mature pedagogical vision suggests that the traditioning process, the process of being incorporated into this community, shapes both what we know and also how we know, both the content of our minds and also the very pattern and posture of our thinking. Of course, this does not render practices like catechesis meaningless; rather, as Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde experiment exemplifies, training in hermeneutical faithfulness occurs both in the classroom and in worship, prayer, service, play, friendship, and hospitality. As I express more fully in chapters 5 and 6, Christology has communal implications. The thick account of communal life on display in Bonhoeffer is itself an interpretation of his Christology, for together these practices constitute a Christological habitus, a way of training and embodying a pattern of existence in the wake of the Risen One.

**Conclusion: Jenson, Bonhoeffer, and the Church as an Institutional Space**

I have argued in Part Two that we ought to situate the church’s institutional dimensions within the Christological. The consistency of Christ’s call throughout history creates the church’s historical-institutional structures. Theologically understood, the institutional form of the church derives from the consistency of Christ to his people. Because Christ is risen, the church is (contra
Jenson) not as threatened by the passage of time as any institution. Ecclesial purity always arises as a byproduct of his risenness, is always a gift, is always received. The church’s identity lies beyond itself in the Risen One it attempts to follow. A church with an inflated concern for identity maintenance ironically risks forfeiting its identity, becoming a community of an idea about Christ and not the church of the Risen One himself.

If an exaggerated account of reading within institutional space forces us to ask the question, “What was the church yesterday?” we can also ask Bonhoeffer’s driving hermeneutical question: “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” The church's historical-institutional past is hermeneutically relevant because Christ continues to walk ahead of his people and call them to follow after him. In this way, I have continued to sketch a multi-dimensional account of the church as a hermeneutical space that issues ultimately in a hermeneutic of discipleship.

Though the church fundamentally lives from an eccentric orientation, the process of being incorporated into the tradition remains a key practice. The fundamental asymmetry that characterizes Jesus’ relationship with his people suggests that both traditioned rationality and Christologically-oriented imagination coexist as the church follows after its Lord. For just this reason, the task of hermeneutical faithfulness requires a dialectical mode of thinking. A onesidedly Christological hermeneutic leaves no room for traditioned innovation—imagination would have free reign, and God’s word would seemingly be apprehended by means of immediate, existentialistic intuition. Conversely, a onesidedly institutional hermeneutic would leave no room for traditioned innovation—repetition would reign, and the promulgation of technique would overshadow the formation of Christ-directed imagination. As a Christological institution the church must remain open to the innovative and imaginative performances that necessarily arise as the Spirit draws Christ’s
people into his ongoing march toward the kingdom, and it must do so precisely on the basis of Christ’s consistent faithfulness to his people in the past.

Because this sort of knowing is simultaneously enabled and limited by the past—and because the object of our knowledge is fundamentally consistent—originality is not necessarily a hermeneutical virtue. Likewise, by suggesting the importance of imagination I am not suggesting that clever readings are necessarily faithful, as if those equipped with poetic brilliance are more suited to handle the text faithfully. By situating the imaginative task within space that is at once historical-institutional and Christological, I am unsettling any easy adjudicatory criteria. Faithful readings must be consistent with the past, just as Christ himself is consistent, and as such they must ultimately fit within the contours of his ongoing reign.

With this we broach a question that has been lurking in the background throughout: how do we discern whether the voice we hear belongs to Christ’s or someone else? How do we know when imagination ceases to be traditioned and instead becomes fanciful? On what basis can the church adjudicate its readings? Along the way I have noted key features of an answer—e.g., constant self-criticism, reading canonically, and awareness of the tradition. But this question deserves more attention. Ultimately, the question of adjudication is a question directed to the community that seeks to follow Jesus. As I hinted above, no technique or method will solve this problem. Instead, the answer must be worked out in company with others, which requires a host of concrete practices that enable communities to function as such. In this sense, the church is a hermeneutical space not only because it exists in relationship to the risen Lord and not only because it exists in relationship to its historical-institutional past—the church is also a hermeneutical space because within it bodies gather together in concrete relation to each other. With this we turn to Part Three.
PART THREE: THE CHURCH AS TOGETHERNESS

One of the great ironies of thinking theologically about Scripture is how little Scripture says about itself. Traditionally, certain verses have carried much theological weight: those that speak about Scripture’s inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16), divine origin (2 Pet. 1:20-21), livingness (Heb. 4:12), or ability to instruct (Rom. 15:4). In recent conversations about theological interpretation it has become common to note Scripture’s own desire to be interpreted Christologically (Jn. 5:39), spiritually (1 Cor. 2:12-16), and in light of the resurrection (Jn. 2:21).

Yet the surest thing the Bible implies about itself is that its reading is communal, a public event (e.g., 1 Tim. 4:13). The biblical narrative rarely portrays the act of reading as a solitary affair. Key hermeneutical moments in the narrative—moments when understanding arises from the text—are also thickly communal moments. Josiah, upon rediscovering the book of the law, gathered to himself all the elders and read in their hearing (2 Kings 23:1-2). Ezra, upon returning from exile, assembled the community around the text and assigned teachers to gather with the people to facilitate understanding (Neh. 8:1-8). The earliest Christians, upon receiving the Spirit at Pentecost, jointly devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. One of the few things we can surmise about Jesus’ reading habits is that he read in public (Lk. 4:16-27). The exception that proves the rule is the imprisoned reader who must read alone and yet who longs for community with other Christians (2 Tim. 4:13). One of the few times we encounter a solitary reader—the Ethiopian eunuch alone on the chariot—his reading lacks understanding (Acts 8:26-40). It is only when Philip joins the eunuch, when they enact togetherness by sitting shoulder to shoulder, that the text comes alive as the word of God.
Perhaps the paradigmatic instance of communal hermeneutics, as we saw in the Introduction, occurs in Luke’s resurrection stories. Walking with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, Jesus performs what we can only assume to be a masterful interpretation, unpacking all of Scripture as a text about himself. Yet to the disciples, this teaching—though robustly Christological and existentially penetrating—remains hermeneutically insufficient. In this story, understanding arises not simply when a master teacher expertly exposits the text but when bodies gather around a shared meal (vv. 29-31). Understanding arises not in pedagogy but in fellowship. A similar situation unfolds in the very next pericope (vv. 36-49). While gathering with the eleven to share a meal of broiled fish, Jesus exposits Scripture and opens their minds to understand it. These stories obviously testify to the gratuitous nature of understanding. Yet they also suggest that hermeneutical grace arrives through the avenue of togetherness. Understanding and gathering are not neatly separable events.

It is likely, moreover, that most (if not all) scriptural texts were addressed to gathered communities. As Markus Bockmuehl suggests,

While we cannot climb into the heads of the original authors to discover their intentions, the documents as they stand do…assume and address a certain kind of audience…Almost invariably, the implied readers are ecclesially situated. Even where they are directly addressed as individuals (e.g., in Luke-Acts or the Pastorals), it is clear that the readers are never undefined and unrelated singularities. Instead, they are assumed to be related to the (or a) body of Christian believers.¹

Even when the specific identity of the intended audience remains ambiguous, we can surmise that the canon carries certain assumptions about its “implied reader,” that a communal Tendenz comes embedded in the text itself. As Bockmuehl goes on to note, this fact, though seemingly simple,

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¹ Bockmuehl, Seeing the Word, 68-71.
challenges certain notions about reading. Contrary to modern assumptions, “The implied reader does not approach the text as a disembodied rational self.”

This growing awareness of Scripture’s communal nature has drawn attention to what some have called the “politics of reading,” to the fact that any hermeneutic is enmeshed within the social composition of the reading community. In a significant study, Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones highlight the implications that follow from: “As a social activity, interpretation is confirmed, constrained, and determined by the political constitution of those contexts in which interpretation takes place…The political nature of any particular context will both shape [interpretive interest] and constrain the types of resources available to any group of interpreters.” The church is a space for reading, then, because of its “political constitution,” because within it various bodies navigate difference and create a shared life as they gather around the text.

Such a politic is paradigmatically on display in Acts 15 when the apostles and elders meet to consider and debate a potentially contentious matter regarding the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the church (vv. 6-7). After a process of shared speaking, listening, and examining Scripture, the community reaches a conclusion: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (v. 28). Here in Part Three I explore the theological anatomy of this “and to us” and consider the ways it might be developed, sustained, and enacted.

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2 Ibid., 71.


4 Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 17.
Toward this end, I press forward toward a holistic ecclesiology, taking up key strands of thinking that have emerged in previous chapters. The church exists simultaneously in relationship to the risen Christ and its historical-institutional past—and precisely in these two relational dynamics it exists concretely as a local gathering of bodies. In analyzing this third ecclesial dynamic, I continue to insist that the proximate contexts of ecclesial hermeneutics subsist within the ultimate. By considering the church as bodies gathered I continue to resist the temptation of placing the theological and socio-historical dimensions of the church in competition. I continue to uphold the fundamental asymmetry and ordered unity that characterizes the church, thereby avoiding easy onesided patterns of thought that reduce the church to one facet of its complex structure.

My focus in Part Three remains relentlessly practical. What does hermeneutical theory and the doctrine of revelation that underlies it imply regarding the concrete enactment of ecclesial existence? In this vein, I continue to sketch a hermeneutical posture that is at once Christological, historical, and communal. While the “how” of God’s speech remains a gift of grace that lies beyond human control or manipulation, here I continue to attend to the “how” of our listening. I have been arguing in this project that this is the “how” of discipleship, and I here argue that precisely as such it requires acts of togetherness.

I begin in chapter 5 by analyzing the work of Stanley Hauerwas. His voice is uniquely relevant to my larger project, for his ecclesial ambidexterity stands as a lived attempt at the sort of multidimensional joining I claim is central to any theologically serious ecclesiology. Some will suggest that anyone who identifies as a high church Mennonite and an evangelical Catholic is

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theologically confused—but perhaps such an elastic imagination is needed to comprehend the complexity of the church as a social reality corresponding to Christ’s ongoing livelihood. Moreover, Hauerwas grasps the thickly communal nature of Christian existence, indeed of the gospel itself. Following his lead, I attempt in chapter 5 to sketch an account of hermeneutical practices of togetherness.

As I will show, many aspects of Hauerwas’ narrative ecclesiology, especially as they emerge in his mature work, accent the historical and institutional dimension of the church. In this sense, his position at times bears a certain resemblance to Jenson’s. The uniqueness of Hauerwas, and one of the reasons he deserves his own chapter in this project, resides in his ability to show how a historical-institutional account of the church must also attend to its concretely communal dimensions. Said differently, Hauerwas demonstrates how there can be no institution stretched through time without the social and material conditions that enable concrete acts of togetherness. Without such acts, the church could perhaps perdure as a static object, but it would not be the dynamic entity that corresponds to Christ’s livelihood.

Hauerwas’ resemblance to Jenson suggests that he is susceptible to some of the same onesided tendencies. I will show, however, that his theology possesses resources that allow him to deal with them differently. In this sense, I offer a partial defense of Hauerwas in response to some recent critics. While his work, taken as a whole, often displays “ecclesiocentric” tendencies, not all strands of his thought fit within this qualifier. This becomes especially clear when we consider the different—perhaps inconsistent—ways he frames the hermeneutical task. At his most ecclesiocentric, Hauerwas over-burdens hermeneutical practices of togetherness in a manner

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analogous to Jenson’s over-burdening of historical-institutional practices. I suggest that this tendency derives from a more basic inconsistency regarding the relationship between Jesus and the church. The way forward, I will show, requires a clearer account of Christ’s resurrected and ascended existence.

This claim directs me to Bonhoeffer. As I argue in chapter 6, Bonhoeffer both affirms the robustly social character of Christian existence and yet consistently affirms the role of Christ himself in the hermeneutical process. If Hauerwas shows how the church’s historical-institutional dimension requires practices of togetherness, Bonhoeffer does the same with the *creatura verbi*. If God speaks, the church must be an “addressable community” equipped to receive and discern the divine address. This constitution is a gift of grace, the acceptance of which takes concrete form as an array of community-sustaining social practices. Especially at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer attempts to put a theory of revelation into practice as he forms a common life that correlates to Jesus’ ongoing agency as the Risen One.

Listening to both Hauerwas and Bonhoeffer, we see that the two lines of thinking I began pursuing in Parts 1 and 2 converge in the local community, at the nexus of bodies gathered. The church is a hermeneutical space, I conclude, because it engages in practices of togetherness that sustain a community gathered around the text.
Chapter 5: Stanley Hauerwas, Togetherness, and a Hermeneutic of Gathering

Hauerwas’ Communal Hermeneutic

My goal in this section is to examine the way Hauerwas construes the church as a space for reading. Though he resists the label of “narrative theologian,” no account of his ecclesial hermeneutic can avoid the concept.⁸ His assertion that “every community requires a narrative”⁹ lies at the heart of his theological ethics, and his unique theological vision takes shape as he unfolds this claim in light of the particular narrative that constitutes the church.

Hauerwas began his career by arguing that morality is dependent upon its narrative context. In this, he proffered a convincing alternative to political liberalism and the modern ethical tradition, both of which rely upon individualistic and universal accounts of rationality. He has subsequently referred to this as a paradigm shift in the field of ethics.¹⁰ Whereas the modern ethical tradition has tended to focus on discrete commands, decisions, and dilemmas, Hauerwas instead focuses on the identity of the ethical agent. Before analyzing what we do, we consider who we are—and in order to do this we must attend to the story that gives shape and substance to our identity.

As with ethical action more generally, the church’s practices gain meaning from their story. According to Hauerwas, these practices in turn sustain the story. In this sense, the logic driving his narrative ecclesiology closely resembles the historical-institutional logic on display in Jenson. As

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⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence (London: SPCK, 2004), 136: “I hate the idea that I am a ‘narrative theologian.’ I hate all qualifiers other than ‘Christian.’”

⁹ Hauerwas, Community of Character, 4.

Hauerwas states, the practices specific to the church develop its common rationality and sustain a common history across time.\(^1\) Moreover, his conception of narrative owes much to the MacIntyrean notion of tradition-based rationality that I employed to explicate Jenson’s ecclesiology. Both Hauerwas and Jenson view narrative as something more than a formalist or literary concept. Though Hauerwas does not probe the logic of narrative with as much theological rigor as Jenson does, he echoes his basic argument about the narrative structure reality: the “appeal to narrative,” Hauerwas states, “is the primary expression of a theological metaphysics and is, therefore, an unembarrassed claim about the way things are.”\(^1\)

This helps explain his reluctance to move behind the story of Jesus in search of a deeper level of truth or a more solid foundation for meaning.\(^1\) The problem with this extra-textual move is not merely that it risks losing theological reflection from the biblical narrative (as the problem is broadly framed, for example, in Frei’s *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*); the problem, more substantively, is that it risks undermining the content of salvation. The reason for this is straightforward: the very person and work of Jesus requires narrative depiction. “Grace is not an eternal moment above history,” Hauerwas avers.\(^1\) It is the very story Jesus lives, a historical event that requires narrative

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\(^1\) Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 146. This claim carries implications for the actual act of reading the text; for example, Hauerwas makes no effort to dig behind the text and instead aims simply “to retell the story [the text] tells” (Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 18) He also resists resorting to “consciousness words” as a means of putatively explaining an author’s mental state, instead opting to attend to the text itself (*Matthew*, 20). For more analysis of Hauerwas as a reader of Scripture, see Hays, *Moral Vision*, 253-265 and Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 145ff.


representation. Through his life, Jesus makes possible a new mode of existence, thereby inaugurating the kingdom. Going to the cross and being vindicated in the resurrection, Jesus shows that “forgiveness and love are alternatives to the coercion the world thinks necessary for existence.”\textsuperscript{15} We are saved, Hauerwas claims, by being invited into the kingdom through the work of Jesus, which is why he construes the church as the ongoing narrative embodiment of Jesus’ story.\textsuperscript{16}

“Salvation,” he therefore insists, is “our material embodiment in the habits and practices of a people that makes possible a way of life that is otherwise impossible.”\textsuperscript{17} The very nature of the gospel implies that it cannot merely be spoken but must also be shown, which is why practices of togetherness are inherent to the narrative logic of salvation. Grace is something one experiences tangibly in community precisely because it provides the rational for a community that recognizes that self-justification was rendered irrelevant in the story of Christ’s death and resurrection.\textsuperscript{18} This is why Hauerwas famously refuses to separate ethics from theology. The very logic of salvation (deriving from the logic of Christ himself) entails a communal form of life.

\textit{Narrative, Togetherness, and Scriptural Hermeneutics}

The central point to note as we move forward is that Hauerwas’ notion of narrative logically entails concrete practices of togetherness. The logic of narrative is inseparable from the logic of

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 87.


\textsuperscript{17} Hauerwas, \textit{Sanctify Them in Truth}, 74.

\textsuperscript{18} On this, see Rowan Williams, \textit{Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another} (Boston: New Seeds, 2005), 26-27.
bodies gathered. Hence, practices of togetherness are in no way ancillary to the substance of the gospel but rather are the necessary corollary of salvation’s historical presence.

Consequently, when Hauerwas considers the role of narrative in hermeneutics he is less concerned with the technicalities of reading the text than with construing the community that does the reading.

Part of the difficulty with the rediscovery of the significance of narrative for theological reflection has been too concentrated attention on texts qua texts. It is no doubt significant to rediscover the literary and narrative character texts of the Bible...But the emphasis on narrative can only result in scholarly narcissism if narrative texts are extracted from the concrete people who acknowledge the authority of the Bible.\(^{19}\)

With this realization we locate Hauerwas’ unique contribution to our account of ecclesial hermeneutics. Though in many ways his larger vision fits within Jenson’s historical-institutional project, he is particularly enriching to our conversation because of his ability to press the logic of tradition into the communal realm and thereby to offer a thick and particularist account of tradition. For Hauerwas, narrative requires politics; tradition requires practices of togetherness.

Consider, for example, the very idea of maintaining historical continuity. Such continuity is, at the least, a process involving real people and concrete moments of teaching and learning. Relational structures and conversational skills are therefore inherent to the logic of tradition, for without them the community would lack the means by which to exist through history. As Hauerwas succinctly argues, Scripture does not convey the story “independently of the existence of a historic people.”\(^{20}\) The historical-institutional dimensions of the church, characteristic of both Jenson’s and

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19 Hauerwas, “The Church as God’s New Language,” in Hauerwas Reader, 152, emphasis added.

Hauerwas’ narrative theology, require concrete practices of togetherness and are hermeneutically vacuous without them.

This points us toward the importance of discipleship as a motif in his theology. Christianity is not “a system of beliefs that can be or is universally known without the conversion of being incorporated within a specific community of people.”21 As he writes in his commentary on Matthew, “It is important…that Peter’s knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah not be used to develop a general theory of revelation. Simon does not learn that Jesus is the Messiah by some intuitive or mystical mode of knowing. Rather, Simon learns that Jesus is the Messiah because he obeyed Jesus’ command to be his disciple.”22 For Hauerwas, discipleship is an epistemological category; the disciples know the Lord not in theory but in following.

He presses this logic into the hermeneutical realm. Discipleship is not the outcome of faithful interpretation but is ingredient in its very process.23 His criticism of general hermeneutics parallels his criticism of the modern ethical tradition more broadly. In rejecting the “academic captivity” of Scripture and “the hegemony of the historical-critical method,”24 he unequivocally insists that hermeneutical excellency is a specifically ecclesial activity. In explicit contrast to both fundamentalism and modern criticism—which he suggests are two sides of the same coin25—Hauerwas avers that Scripture is not universally accessible; it requires a very particular sort of reader.

21 Stanley Hauerwas, Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 53.

22 Hauerwas, Matthew, 150.


24 Ibid., 8.

25 Ibid., 17.
Most obviously, this implies that one must read Scripture in light of tradition.\textsuperscript{26} But Hauerwas adds communal thickness to this logic by emphasizing that “all reading is embedded in a politics.”\textsuperscript{27} All reading requires an account of the reading community, not just as an entity that conveys ecclesial knowledge but as bodies gathered within a shared story. We should take the Bible out of the hands of individuals, he famously claims, not simply because they do not know the right things but because they do not embody the right story. Here he draws from Yoder: “To speak of the Bible apart from people reading it and apart from the specific questions that those people reading need to answer is to do violence to the very purpose for which we have been given the Holy Scriptures.”\textsuperscript{28} Another way of saying this is that the church does not merely have a hermeneutical theory—it is one. To read in light of tradition, Hauerwas maintains, is to read as a community that embodies the politic that the tradition makes possible.

\textit{Practices of Togetherness}

This helps makes sense of what is perhaps the most distinctive feature of his scriptural hermeneutic: the church is a space for reading because its narrative, embodied through an array of concrete activities, forms people who possess the skills and dispositions necessary to read the Bible faithfully. Outside of the church, reading Scripture is an eminently difficult task, not because the text is a complex literary artifact but because readers employ it for the wrong ends. The difficulty of

\textsuperscript{26} In\textit{ Unleashing the Scriptures}, he favorably quotes Vatican II’s “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”: “Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the church” (22); see Hays, \textit{Moral Vision}, 263.

\textsuperscript{27} Hauerwas, \textit{Unleashing the Scriptures}, 15.

reading lies not in the text but in ourselves. He even goes so far as to suggest that it is not good interpretation that produces non-violence but non-violence that produces good interpretation. The church’s formative practices precede the act of reading, for such practices are the necessary precondition for seeing the text rightly.

According to Hauerwas, this training occurs primarily when bodies gather to worship. Worship, of course, is most fundamentally a work rendered to God. But he notes that it is also a work done to us, a work that provides “resistance to the ugliness of [the] surrounding culture.” If “it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced,” as Aristotle famously suggests, then it is by engaging in worship that the godly person is produced. “It becomes our duty to be a people who submit to the discipline of the liturgy,” Hauerwas writes, “as it is there that we are trained with the skills rightly to know the story.” As he elsewhere states, “the regular, continual pattern of gathering for worship may be viewed as the church’s rehearsal. Worship thus becomes a kind of performance before the performance, it is where Christian commitment is ‘fleshed out’ and given tangible shape.”

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29 Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 239, no. 5.
31 Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scriptures*, 64.
35 Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 98.
It becomes evident that worship, for Hauerwas, is no internal or private matter. Liturgy is an embodied and public activity. What might remain formal becomes three dimensional as Christians bump shoulders around the altar. This corporeality is essential to worship’s formative capacity. Rather than a mere side effect of gathering, the act of bumping of shoulders is itself materially significant, for it allows the community to identity those who ought to be imitated. In other words, the very authority of Scripture, Hauerwas claims, is contingent upon the regular movement of bodies toward each other. The text is mediated not only by worship itself, but by the spiritual masters that worship enables the community to identify.\textsuperscript{36} He writes,

\begin{quote}
The authority of Scripture is mediated through the lives of the saints identified by our community as most nearly representing what we are about. Put more strongly, to know what Scripture means, finally, we must look to those who have most nearly learned to exemplify its demands through their lives…Through the lives of the saints we begin to understand how the images of Scripture are best balanced so that we might tell and live the ongoing story of God’s unceasing purpose to bring the world to the peace of the kingdom.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

In short, Hauerwas’ narrative theology leads him to emphasize Scripture’s location among bodies gathered. The hermeneutical enterprise, then, is always located concretely within a “web of ecclesial practices, skills, and gestures.”\textsuperscript{38} More specifically, the mutually reinforcing practices of liturgy and imitation form faithful readers who are fit to handle the text. As with the logic of Christ and his kingdom, these practices of formation require togetherness. In my terms, Hauerwas illustrates how the church as a historical institution—a story stretching across time—gains hermeneutical significance by means of concrete acts of gathering which form faithful readers.


\textsuperscript{37} Hauerwas, \textit{Peaceable Kingdom}, 70-1.

\textsuperscript{38} Cartwright, “Readers’ Guide,” 641.
An Over-Realized Hermeneutic?

Someone as prolific and provocative as Hauerwas has garnered no dearth of criticism. It is unnecessary here to survey all that has been said. However, we should note one particularly contentious dimension of his narrative ecclesiology, for it carries implications for his ecclesial hermeneutic.

The tendency in question can be articulated in various ways. Most basically, the problem lies in his tendency to equate the kingdom with the church, what some have called an over-realized eschatology.³⁹ Hauerwas’ narrative logic, the argument goes, implies that Christ’s gift of salvation quite simply is the community of followers he creates. Salvation is the community. One recent critic has forcefully referred to this as Hauerwas’ “onto-ecclesiology,” his depiction of the church as an objectively given reality, constituted by liturgical practices, that stands empirically as the supreme manifestation of God’s salvation.⁴⁰

This line of critique has some traction. As Hauerwas himself claims, the church’s practices manifest the peace of God and thus the salvation of the world, which is why he boldly contends that the church in history is what the world can be.⁴¹ He likewise asserts that Jesus “proclaims and

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⁴⁰ Ry O. Siggelkow, “Toward an Apocalyptic Peace Church: Christian Pacifism After Hauerwas,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 31, no. 3 (2013): 1-18. Here Siggelkow plays with Heidegger’s notion of “onto-theology”: “By onto-ecclesiology, I mean the attempt to ground the church theologically in terms of its metaphysical correspondence to the reality of Being…Indeed, it is the church’s being—objectively given in its liturgical practices and institutional life—that is the ‘supreme manifestation’ and the ‘all-founding’ *logos* of the totality of beings as such” (1). Milbank’s notion of the church as a “counter ontology” lies behind this analysis; on Hauerwas’ use of Milbank, see Hauerwas, “Creation, Contingency, and Truthful Nonviolence: A Milbankian Reflection,” in *Wilderness Wanderings*, 188-198.

embodies a way of life that God has made possible here and now” and thus that his work establishes the new age. The basic problem, critics claim, is that rather than an eschatological goal, salvation becomes a communal achievement. Hauerwas subsequently requires the various practices of togetherness that shape the community to accomplish a hefty task. The church, and hence salvation, simply is the reality these practices make tangible.

Darren Sarisky has recently pressed upon the hermeneutical implications of this here-and-now logic, claiming that Hauerwas’ “notion of the reader needs to specify more clearly that readers do not reach their end before the eschaton.” His narrative ecclesiology seems to imply that the various practices of togetherness that constitute the church as a space for reading can be counted on, in and of themselves, to render interpretive faithfulness. Sarisky might ask: can one participate in the liturgy and emulate the saints and thereby appropriate the traditions and practices of the community and yet offer unfaithful readings? Does formation guarantee hermeneutical faithfulness?

This critique goes further. An over-realized account of hermeneutical space, it would seem, actually deteriorates the logic of reading, rendering superfluous the ongoing hermeneutical process. Within such a space, there is little left for Scripture to accomplish—the work of formation and imitation does the heavy hermeneutical lifting before one even turns to the text. The hermeneutical process itself becomes an afterthought, a byproduct that emanates naturally from a well-formed reader. By the time we have learned to read well, we no longer need to read.

42 Hauerwas, Peaceable Kingdom, 83.
43 Hauerwas, Matthew, 150.
44 Sarisky, Scriptural Interpretation, 141.
Richard Hays similarly wonders if Hauerwas’ strong turn toward the community erodes the leverage by which Scripture can challenge, judge, or change the community. 45 Given Hauerwas’ narrative logic, Hays suggests that he has no choice but to offer a muzzled and muted text, one that only echoes back the church’s antecedent speech. 46 Put differently, if the church is constituted by the practices that instantiate and embody its narrative, in what sense is the church also constituted by Christ? To frame this critique within my larger project: Hauerwas helpfully highlights the ways that the church as a historical entity requires practices of togetherness in order to function as a hermeneutical community, but does he not thereby fall into the same onesided tendencies that lurk around strongly historical-institutional approaches? 47

The deeper issue underlying this account of the church as the narrative instantiation of the kingdom is that it risks undermining the logic of discipleship. Whereas Bonhoeffer’s discipleship motif operates under the assumption that faithfulness lies always ahead of the church, an exaggerated account of Christian practice collapses the church’s goal into its present form. The worry, then, is that an over-realized hermeneutic fails to direct interpretive activity toward funding the movement necessary to follow Jesus on the way. If for Jenson institutional structures bear the great burden of maintaining ecclesial identity, for Hauerwas practices of togetherness bear the great burden of situating one within these structures and thereby securing faithful interpretive outcomes.

Nicholas Healy has recently argued along similar lines. 47 Though he does not focus his critique on scriptural hermeneutics per se, he does explore the underlying theological rationale that

45 Hays, Moral Vision, 263.
46 Ibid., 265-6.
makes Hauerwas’ hermeneutic possible. He labels Hauerwas’ larger project “ecclesiocentric.” He means this pejoratively to denote the sense in which his enthusiastic turn to the church, its narrative, and its institutions leads him to underplay the ongoing priority of God. On Healy’s reading, Hauerwas expects the social and immanent dimensions of the church to do what should more properly be attributed to grace alone. What should be God’s responsibility instead becomes an attribute of the story itself. Healy writes,

If, however, we are a Christian, we do not so easily inhabit our tradition, for it is axiomatic for us that we need to make ongoing efforts to convert if we are to be a good Christian. It is relatively easy to be a good liberal or a good socialist if you are so inclined; it is never easy to follow Jesus Christ truly. Furthermore, the more one tries, the more explicit (to ourselves, at least) must be our judgments as to what constitutes Christianity and how it should be lived. We have to think about being a Christian in a way that does not necessarily pertain to being a liberal; being Christian involves effort, prayer, and fasting, not least because we are to follow One who is our Lord, rather than merely inhabit a tradition.48

At the core of Hauerwas’ mistake, Healy argues, is his tendency to filter his notion of narrative through a non-theological account of tradition (drawing heavily from MacIntyre), thereby reducing Christian discipleship to the process of indwelling a tradition or embodying a story. The danger in this is that discipleship becomes institutionalized and generic. What should be a dynamic, complex, and adventurous affair—the process of continually trying to keep up with Christ—is rendered tame and predictable. What Hauerwas needs, Healy claims, is a more robustly Christian approach to discipleship that frames various ecclesial practices within a more distinctly theocentric account of the church.

48 Ibid., 106, first emphasis added.
A Hauerwasian Response: Togetherness and Discipleship

These criticisms hold much truth. Yet as a means of nuancing my analysis of Hauerwas I would like to highlight another dimension of his communal hermeneutic. Doing so does not completely absolve him of the aforementioned charges, but it does suggest that there is more going on in his account of ecclesial space than these critics notice. And, as I explore below, it points toward an alternative way of framing his account of hermeneutical practices of togetherness.

We have seen already that practices of togetherness form readers for the text. But Hauerwas at times also suggests that the text itself forms readers to fit within the story of Jesus. Formation, in other words, happens in two directions: from the church to the text and from the text to the church. While Hauerwas sometimes seems to load interpretive agency squarely upon the community and its constitutive practices, thereby falling into overly-realized hermeneutic, he writes in other places that Scripture itself is an agent that “renders” and “shapes a community,” making the church into a “story-formed” people.49 On this reading, the community per se is necessary but not sufficient for faithfulness. More is required than is immanently available. This second account of formation grants Scripture a measure of freedom and leverage vis-à-vis the reading community, thereby relieving communal practices of bearing a burden beyond their capacity. The community, in and of itself, is not responsible for actualizing the text. Rather, the community exists in relationship to a text that can act on its own. Scripture does things: it overtakes the reader’s world and trains people for Christ’s story.50

49 Hauerwas, Community of Character, 67, 55.
50 Hauerwas, Peaceable Kingdom, 74.
These two accounts of the direction of scriptural formation tend to occur in different places in his corpus. When talking specifically about ethical issues, Hauerwas often notes the priority of the text, whereas when talking specifically about scriptural hermeneutics he tends to focus on the priority of the community. This obvious circularity appears not to bother him. As much as he imagines formation running in two directions, his strongly “ecclesiocentric” approach to interpretation may avoid some of the common criticisms, and we can reconsider the extent to which he offers an over-realized hermeneutic.

In particular, we can reconsider Healy’s contention that “Christianity cannot be anything like a tradition in MacIntyre’s sense, because it is engaged with an agent that cannot be explained or controlled or harnessed to human projects of development toward excellence.”51 I certainly agree with the latter half of Healy’s claim, as the account of discipleship that has unfolded in this project should make clear. Yet he misapplies the logic of the argument. While a Christ-centered account of discipleship cannot be entirely like MacIntyre’s notion of tradition, certain dimensions of MacIntyre’s thinking actually fund the account of discipleship Healy desires. And I suggest that Hauerwas understands this, not only theoretically but, most tellingly, at the level of practice.

MacIntyre writes, for example, that “traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict.”52 Hauerwas appropriates this logic when he claims that “traditions by their nature require change.”53 He goes on to note that “politics is nothing else but a community’s internal conversation with itself concerning the various possibilities of understanding and extending its life…[and thereby]

51 Healy, Hauerwas, 109.
52 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 22.
53 Hauerwas, Community of Character, 61.
drawing nearer to the truth about itself and the world.” On this reading, practices of togetherness are hermeneutically significant precisely to the degree that they allow the community to navigate conflict and engage in argument. Such practices, in other words, do not determine meaning but enable the process of discovering it.

Though Healy is perhaps right to note Hauerwas’ general reluctance to talk about God, we should acknowledge that Hauerwas does at times link the movement of tradition to divine action. The church “must always remain open to revision,” he claims, “since the subject of its narrative is easily domesticated.” On this reading, to embody the Christian narrative is to engage in a journey, which is why, as Hauerwas suggests, the church must resist foreclosing the story. He also at times claims that the church’s material and communal life is not itself the presence of the kingdom but stands only as a foretaste of it. There is more left for the community to discover, for the God of the story cannot be sequestered within the church’s telling of it.

Healy and others believe that Hauerwas’ narrative theology undermines “ongoing efforts to convert” and precludes the logic of self-criticism or the pursuit of better readings. Yet I suggest that Hauerwas’ notion of argumentation, navigating conflict, and “drawing nearer to the truth” can account for this. This is how the “not yet” of the kingdom plays out in practice.

On this second reading, we can imagine Hauerwas’ practices of togetherness functioning within an eschatological horizon, even if he does not always frame things this way. Introducing a

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54 Ibid.
56 Hauerwas, Performing the Faith, 94. On the importance of the “journey” motif in Hauerwas’ narrative theology, see Community of Character, 59-63, 98-99; Peaceable Kingdom, 24, 68; Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 49-53; and Hauerwas Reader, 85-87.
57 Hauerwas, Peaceable Kingdom, 97.
consistent eschatological dimension would not require Hauerwas to modify his strongly historical account of salvation; we continue to affirm that grace does not hover above history but takes communal form as the story Jesus makes possible. Hence, narrative and the concomitant account of practices of togetherness remain vital for construing the church as a hermeneutical space. Yet his refusal to engage in supra-historical reasoning need not imply the converse, that salvation is fully present in history. We can uphold both the essentially material, embodied, and communal nature of the church—the here-and-now tangibility of the narrative—and the church’s being as a community en route, a community that seeks ultimate fulfillment in God’s future.

Hermeneutics En Route: Practices for the Journey

While Hauerwas’ theology can be read in a way that funds an over-realized eschatology that undermines the logic of discipleship and over-burdens ecclesial practices, I have suggested that it can also, on this alternative reading, elucidate the nature of the Christian life as a journey, another key motif in his writing. Understood in this way, Jesus’ salvific work both instantiates the kingdom and initiates a community into an adventurous journey toward it. Practices of togetherness, then, are not expected to deliver the meaning of Scripture as much as enable the ongoing journey of discipleship through which meaning is discovered. This depiction of reading—a hermeneutic en route—calls for a second account of practices of togetherness. If Scripture functions within a community that lives en route toward a kingdom that lies always ahead of it, faithful reading requires the skills and practices that enable the journey.

58 Ibid., 87.
Implied within this account of practices is that the kingdom is neither an instantaneous moment that descends timelessly from above (as it can become in some highly revelational models) nor an entity that stands in opposition to time (as it can become in some highly institutional models). In both cases, time itself is rendered an insignificant feature of God’s action and is thereby made irrelevant to the hermeneutical process. The notion of Christian life as a journey presents another option. The temporal gap between resurrection and parousia is neither a threat to ecclesial identity nor an unfortunate byproduct of a delayed second coming; rather, it is the proper and necessary context of faithful communal life. Practices of togetherness, on this reading, equip the community to navigate time faithfully.

Most obviously, then, Hauerwas suggests that between resurrection and parousia the church must live *patiently*. More than a mere tactic for achieving tolerance, patience has a theological core, revealing God’s very nature. This is evident in the act of creation itself, for in it God grants creatures time to live with God. In addition, patience is integral to the embodiment of God’s love in the midst of creation; Jesus’ non-violent acceptance of the cross reveals that patience is what faithfulness to God looks like when enacted in the flesh. And patience underlies the being of the church itself, for the community exists precisely because God has granted it time between resurrection and parousia. Thus Christians live together in the midst of this time precisely by reciprocating God’s patience in their relationships with each other. In this sense, patience is integral to the very logic of togetherness: “To learn to live with the unavoidability of the other,” Hauerwas claims, “is to learn to

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be patient.” Hence he refers to the church as “a people constituted by the virtues necessary to endure the struggle to hear and speak truthfully to one another.”

As important as the theological virtues are, they can be easily confused with their semblances. Patience, then, is not a glib optimism that things will turn out in the end but a vigilant commitment to remain alert in the time between the times. Patience is fundamental to a living community that follows a living Lord. In this sense, the practice of patience leaves the church space to navigate and negotiate, to recognize a future not reducible to the past. By emulating Christ’s patience, the church can freely abandon the goal of securing any particular outcome to history. Patience is thus the communal enactment of the “not yet” of God’s kingdom, the community’s admission that it only follows and does not lead.

A community of peace constituted by Christ and his story is not a community without conflict or a community where conflict is quickly absolved but one in which conflict is endured. The specifically hermeneutical implications of patience emerge when the virtue is enacted in practices of listening and speaking, in what Hauerwas refers to as the community’s “internal conversation” that enables the pursuit of truth. The very togetherness that constitutes the church as a space for reading is sustained by the patient practice of language. Patience, in this sense, leaves space for hermeneutical discourse— for dialogue and discernment, for forms of speech that allow the community to sustain unity in the midst of disagreement, for discourse that holds open the possibility of modes of life that more closely approximate truth.

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60 Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 176.


62 Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 175.

63 Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 61
When patience is enacted as hermeneutical discourse, the process of seeking understanding can become a genuinely communal reality. One is freed to treat the insight of another as a gift to be received, explored, and cherished. Patience, in this sense, alleviates the fear of hidden agendas and rhetorical games and thereby paves the way for trust and interrelatedness. Within a space girded by patience, one can learn really to listen. Patience lies at the heart of practices of togetherness, then, because it enables the pursuit of truth and the multidirectional process of teaching, learning, and discerning. The practice of patience admits that my way of reading is not the only way, that others have insights into the text that I lack. Patience allows for—indeed, desires—a community of diverse readers. It willingly sits in ambiguity and uncertainty and is therefore one of the defining marks of a hermeneutic en route. Within such a hermeneutic, the interpretation of Scripture is neither an instantaneous nor individualistic affair. Various claims about what interpretive faithfulness entails in a given community and in a given context must be carefully assessed, and the patient enactment of hermeneutical discourse allows a community to continually engage its text as it pursues its the Lord.\(^6^4\)

This account of patience, I suggest, makes little sense within an ecclesiocentric theology. If the kingdom is present in and as the church, as sometimes seems to be the case in Hauerwas, there would be no “not yet” standing over the faithful community calling for the enactment of patient hermeneutical discourse. In this regard, Hauerwas’ practical account of togetherness sustained through practices of patience runs against the grain of his over-realized ecclesiology.

Conclusion

Hauerwas’ narrative ecclesiology, taken as a whole, helps us see that hermeneutical faithfulness is a social skill. The church, for Hauerwas, is the social embodiment of the narrative that Jesus’ makes possible. The practices that sustain the community are integral to the logic of salvation. The church is a space for reading not simply because it transmits data or forms a certain cognitive makeup but because it sustains discipleship.

In fairness to both Hauerwas and his critics, we must also admit that the notion of discipleship takes two different forms in his work. That is to say, two narrative logics emerge, one that construes the church as itself the narrative embodiment of the kingdom and another that construes the church on a journey toward it. While this might seem overly nuanced, the distinction plays out in practice. Of course, the two sets of practices that Hauerwas’ two narrative logics respectively generate do not necessarily stand at odds with each other. Practices of togetherness that form one for the community (e.g., worship, liturgy, imitation) and practices of togetherness that form the community for the journey (e.g., patient discourse) are both integral to the church as a hermeneutical space. Hauerwas’ bidirectional account of scriptural formation, in and of itself, is not the problem. Problems do arise, however, when the logic of the former displaces the logic of the latter. We certainly indwell the story of the church, but this becomes onesided when the church itself becomes the end of the story.

I suggest that Hauerwas’ tendency at times to drift in this direction derives from an underlying Christological tendency. Hauerwas tends, at times, to construe the community strictly in terms of Jesus’ ongoing story and not in terms of Jesus’ ongoing life. His theology is rightly labeled “Christological.” The problem, however, is that his Christological emphasis is often misplaced. He
beautifully accounts for Jesus’ narrative presence to the community, but lost in his vision is Christ’s concrete and personal presence. This tendency becomes especially evident when he places the church “in a narrative relationship to Jesus and the Gospels, within a story that subsumes both.”65 This Christological move nicely accents the significance of the church’s story; the danger, however, is that the story about Jesus becomes more basic than Jesus himself.

Some critics have picked up on this. Nathan Kerr, for example, suggests that Hauerwas’ offers a “community-dependent understanding of Jesus’ person” that underplays Jesus’ ongoing independence.66 He goes on to argue that for Hauerwas the church thereby inflates to become the subject and agent of the ongoing Jesus-story.67 According to this logic, Jesus exerts salvific influence as a character from history, as the one who performed the kingdom and thereby opened the way for his followers to perform it as well. On this reading, it is the story of Jesus that connects his work then to the church’s embodiment of it now.

Though there is certainly some truth in this depiction of Jesus, it lacks something of his particularity and concreteness, his freedom to act in history apart from the church.68 What traditional theology accomplishes by reference to the resurrection and ascension, Hauerwas accomplishes by reference to story. Or, perhaps more precisely, the resurrection becomes a key feature of Jesus’ first century identity but not of his ongoing identity as a singular agent. Hauerwas struggles to uphold the

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65 Hauerwas, Wilderness Wanderings 192; here quoting Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 387.
67 Ibid., 106.
68 On this depiction of Jesus, see Rowan Williams, “Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne,” in On Christian Theology, 183-196.
sense in which the church is the creature of the word. He can claim that Christ *created* the church, but not that he still does.

Healy helpfully highlights this tendency: “As a result of this sharp turn to the church, Jesus becomes of interest more as an exemplar and guide for us than for who he is as himself.” The Christological weakness evident at times in Hauerwas is not that Jesus is the church, as in Jenson, but that he remains merely a historical figure lying behind it. Webster puts his finger on this issue when he names Albrecht Ritschl as Hauerwas’ theological progenitor. Webster contends that Ritschl’s “conviction that Christian faith is principally a mode of active moral community [is] not far from much that may be found in Hauerwas’ corpus.” More pointedly, Webster suggests that Hauerwas’ theology is plagued by a lingering sense of “moral immanentism.” While Webster may overstate the issue (I have considered already how Hauerwas can also speak of a reality that transcends the community), this notion of moral immanentism alerts us to the possible “hermeneutical immanentism” that corresponds to an over-realized ecclesiology.

This further helps us grasp the sense in which a more robust account of the resurrection and ascension would counter the tendency toward an over-realized hermeneutic. Difficulties arise, in other words, when we load the hermeneutical burden on the story-formed community and not the living subject of the story who forms the community. Hauerwas readily admits that the church is “formed by a savior who *was*…always on the move”—a more robust account of the resurrection would allow him to account for a savior who still *is*.

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69 Healy, *Hauerwas*, 70.


71 Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 102, emphasis added.
This would subsequently require him to locate hermeneutical practices of togetherness more consistently in relation to the ongoing journey of following after Jesus and thus to articulate hermeneutical practices that focalize on the Risen One. Said differently, if over-burdened hermeneutical practices assume that truth lies within the community itself and must be realized by intra-ecclesial activity, a more robust account of the resurrection reminds us that truth must also be received. If the former places the hermeneutical community under the pressure to produce, the latter instills a sense of freedom into the hermeneutical process, a joy that comes from trusting in the risen Christ.

Even if Hauerwas lacks the concrete Christological vision I am pressing for in this project, his tendency at times to articulate practices of togetherness in terms of the journey metaphor leaves theoretical space for it within his larger body of work. His account of the church’s narrative as a journey marked by conflict and growth would carry more force and coherence if framed within a particularist and singular account of the resurrection, if there were a lively one with whom and toward whom the church journeys. This would hold together his multifaceted account of formation and togetherness, and it would prevent him from lapsing into an over-realized hermeneutic.

This is precisely where Bonhoeffer can again come to our aid. Following his lead, I claim in chapter 6 that practices of togetherness carry hermeneutical value precisely because Christ has been raised from the dead.
Chapter 6: Bonhoeffer’s Communal Hermeneutic

There is nothing artificial about bringing Hauerwas and Bonhoeffer into conversation. Hauerwas himself acknowledges his intellectual debt to Bonhoeffer. The strong account of faith’s public visibility that emerged in *Discipleship* taught Hauerwas that Christian life requires communal embodiment.¹ For both theologians, the logic of togetherness lies near the heart of the gospel. Yet Bonhoeffer enriches our conversation by framing practices of togetherness in relation to a concrete and particularist account of Jesus. Jesus is not merely a historical influence, an exemplar, or the founder of a new community (though he is all these things); he is also personally present to the community as the risen Lord.

This account of Christ shapes Bonhoeffer’s understanding of communal practices. Bodily togetherness is integral to the process of enabling and sustaining the church’s narrative embodiment of Christ’s story, as Hauerwas shows. Yet such practices also sustain ongoing openness to Christ himself. If Hauerwas shows how the historical institution requires communal embodiment, Bonhoeffer does the same with *creatura verbi*. If the Risen One is an agent who speaks to the church, practices of togetherness are hermeneutically necessary, for they form a community fit to hear this

¹ Hauerwas claims that reading Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship* prepared him for Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus*; see Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 35. Also see Hauerwas’ essay, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 136-149. Hauerwas does not explicitly write about Bonhoeffer until the 2000s, but when he does he calls it an acknowledgment of a debt long overdue. He claims that he felt prohibited from writing about Bonhoeffer earlier in his career due to Bonhoeffer’s early reception in English language theology as a death of God theologian; see “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Political Theology” and “Bonhoeffer on Truth and Politics,” in *Performing the Faith*. Recent attempts to read Bonhoeffer as a virtue ethicist suggest that the similarities run even deeper; see Jennifer Moberly, *The Virtue of Bonhoeffer’s Ethics: A Study of Bonhoeffer’s Ethics in Relation to Virtue Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013). Though there are undoubtedly points of resonance between Bonhoeffer and the virtue tradition, in my estimate the virtue tradition, per se, does not capture the full force of Bonhoeffer’s Christological imagination. For a recent theological comparison of Bonhoeffer and Hauerwas, see Robert J. Dean, *For the Life of the World: Jesus Christ and the Church in the Theologies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Stanley Hauerwas* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).
word. I argue below that this theory takes shape at Finkenwalde. Bonhoeffer’s experiment in common life and education is a lived attempt at communal faithfulness to the risen Christ—and precisely as such, I argue, it is a distinctly hermeneutical endeavor.

**Bonhoeffer, the *Creatura Verbi*, and Sociality**

A social account of Christology emerged early in Bonhoeffer’s academic career. As a student his theological imagination was taken with the task of showing how idealism undermines genuine community. As I noted in earlier chapters, for him Christ is always “Christ existing as community.” In his dissertations he offers what Charles Marsh refers to as a post-Kantian account of selfhood. Jesus, not the self, is the center of all relationships, the one who mediates between the self and others. This means that in Christ there are no self-contained identities. The encounter with Christ displaces the ego that once blocked the way to others. Genuine sociality becomes possible as the *cor currum in se* is turned outwards. Revelation carries significant anthropological implications, therefore, as it establishes genuine being-in-relation. Salvation creates intimacy and union where sin once created separation and discord.

But this union is not uniformity. Christ’s community-creating presence does not nullify personal distinction. In Christ’s community, each person remains individually unique and yet, through Christ, inseparably related to others. In this way, Bonhoeffer portrays the church as a differentiated unity that avoids the poles of individualism and collectivism. His social Christology

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2 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1, 45ff.
4 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 2, 119.
suggests that oneness is not a matter of bland homogeneity or willed tolerance but of diversity unified in movement toward Christ. This new mode of existence, he suggests, is not a feature of communities in general—it is a feature of Christ’s community. Given Christ’s unique identity, community is a necessary corollary of his presence. “Because Christian community is founded solely on Jesus Christ…it differs absolutely from all other communities,” Bonhoeffer claims. Jesus is indeed an irreducibly singular and utterly unique figure, but never a lone ranger who exists in isolation from his relationships. His followers are ingredient, not accidental, to his identity. In Bonhoeffer’s terminology, his very person is characterized by his pro nobis relationship to humanity.

Given the identity of the one who calls, discipleship is fundamentally social, a communal way of life. The revelatory presence of this Christ creates genuine community where before there was only a conglomeration of individuals. Christ’s address does not merely convey data; it creates togetherness; it forges connections that would not exist apart from the miracle of his presence. The Christ who constitutes the church by his address and the Christ whose faithfulness throughout history grounds the church’s institutional structures is the same Christ who brings bodies into proximity.

Bonhoeffer’s early sociological analysis becomes concrete as he learns to explicate the logic of Christ and community in terms of discipleship. “Because Christ exists, he must be followed,”

5 Bonhoeffer, DBWF: 5, 38.

6 Of course, it is not unusual for Christian theology to understand Jesus as “God acting alone” in the sense that Jesus himself, not the community, hangs on the cross and goes to the grave. Yet I would suggest that the gospel narratives prevent us from imagining Jesus in isolation, quarantined from his relationships. Jesus’ identity is always enacted and defined in relationship with others. His solitude on the cross is so stark and shocking precisely because we have come to situate his identity vis-à-vis the disciples who have abandoned him.

7 The notion that Jesus’ calling and commissioning of his disciples is ingredient in his identity comes from David E. Demson, Hans Frei and Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).
Bonhoeffer claims.\textsuperscript{8} Discipleship is nothing less than embodied and enacted Christology. Bethge goes so far as to suggest that Bonhoeffer’s notion of discipleship raised Christology “from its academic deathbed.”\textsuperscript{9} Bonhoeffer states the matter clearly: “The bond between Jesus and the disciples who followed him was a bodily bond. This was no accident but a necessary consequence of the incarnation. A prophet and teacher would not need followers, but only students and listeners. But the incarnate Son of God who took on human flesh does need a community of followers.”\textsuperscript{10} One enters into relationship with an idea by means of knowledge, Bonhoeffer claims, but with an incarnate Lord by means of discipleship.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Togetherness as a Mode of Knowing}

This Christological account of grace fundamentally reshapes how Christians view one another.

A human being is created as a body; the Son of God appeared on earth in the body for our sake and was raised in the body. In the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body, and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the perfected community of God’s spiritual-physical creatures. \textit{Therefore, the believer praises [God] for the bodily presence of the other Christian…The nearness of a fellow Christian [is] a physical sign of the gracious presence of the Triune God.}\textsuperscript{12}

This gets to the heart of Bonhoeffer’s social Christology, and it provides the foundation for his communal experiment. The logic of Christian community is predicated upon the conviction that

\textsuperscript{8} Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 59.
\textsuperscript{9} Bethge, \textit{Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, 460.
\textsuperscript{10} Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 215.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{12} DBWE 5, 29, emphasis added.
God’s grace takes bodily form as the physical presence of others. Bodies moved by grace into community become a source of grace to each other.

This grace carries epistemological consequences, changing not only what we know but how we know. Sarah Coakley has something like this in mind when she engages in the bold task of exploring the epistemic conditions necessary for discerning Jesus. She speaks of a “transformation of the believer’s actual epistemic apparatus” and a “deepened spiritual perception”\(^\text{13}\) that the believer develops over time. In contrast to theories that view revelation as a timeless moment of intuition, Coakley suggests that this transformed epistemic apparatus results from a lifetime of practice, purgation, and prayer. For her, in other words, transformative grace must be enacted through what she calls the church’s “epistemological program.”\(^\text{14}\) Hermeneutical implications follow close behind, for this epistemic apparatus functions as what others have called the “eyes of faith” necessary to read Scripture rightly.\(^\text{15}\) As Webster notes, “Scripture must be read for what it is. But it can only be so read by those in whom a certain change has been wrought.”\(^\text{16}\)

There is much to gain from Coakley, and Bonhoeffer would certainly sympathize with her basic agenda. His account of Christ, however, adds a thickly communal dimension to the notion of epistemological change she suggests. For him, the change in one’s ability to know is inseparably linked to the presence of the bodies gathered and mediated by Christ. When revelation inverts the

\(^\text{13}\) Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 130-131.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 139.

\(^\text{15}\) See Hays, “Reading Scripture in Light of the Resurrection,” 235: “Reading Scripture in light of the resurrection produces an epistemological transformation of the readers…The resurrection produces a ‘conversion of the imagination’ that causes us to understand everything else differently.” While Hays speaks of epistemological transformation, he sometimes equates this with the mere *addition* of new knowledge (i.e., of the resurrection) that subsequently reframes previously held knowledge. It is not clear that he has in mind a new *mode or style of knowing*, e.g., the way Coakley does.

\(^\text{16}\) Webster, “In the Shadow of Biblical Work,” 81, emphasis added.
Cor curvum in se it creates what Marsh refers to the “ecstatic quality of life in Christ.” This opens up new possibilities for knowledge. The communal process of discipleship, precisely because it entails an act of following with diverse toward whom one is now oriented, is itself an epistemological program. The change in epistemological apparatus is the change of social location. In making this claim I continue to assert that Christ himself creates the conditions by which his word is received; revelation is always free, always a gift. But Bonhoeffer’s social vision invites us to imagine that the Spirit’s act of drawing bodies into community with Christ is itself this condition. The gathering of bodies around the risen Lord affects how one knows.

Epistemological change, then, is a gift of grace, and precisely as such it cannot be reduced to a mystical interior event. Given the identity of this grace and the nature of its arrival, its presence necessarily coincides with the emergence of a community. Early in his career Bonhoeffer argued that “the church of Jesus Christ that is actualized by the Holy Spirit is really the church here and now.” I suggest that the practices of togetherness that constitute the community at Finkenwalde represent the concrete form of this Spirit-enabled actualization. What was largely a matter of theory in his dissertations becomes a matter of communal practices, an embodied form of life. His Finkenwalde experiment, I therefore contend, should be read as the concrete enactment of “Christ existing as community.”

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17 Marsh, Reclaiming Bonhoeffer, 139.

18 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1, 208.
Finkenwalde: The Formation of an Addressable Community

In the face of the Nazification of the church in Germany, the Dahlem Synod of October 1934 sought to provide institutional distinction and clarity for the newly emerging Confessing Church. Toward this end, it established five independent Confessing seminaries, one of which came to be located in Finkenwalde and fell under Bonhoeffer’s leadership.

At that time in Germany, church seminaries often supplemented university education by providing practical instruction and preparation for ordination. As a student, Bonhoeffer’s academic elitism led him to look down upon the practical training such seminaries provided.19 His enthusiasm toward the prospect of leading the Finkenwalde community thus comes as something of a surprise, and it highlights Bonhoeffer’s spiritual and theological development during the early 1930s.

Indeed, the years immediately preceding Finkenwalde witnessed a marked shift in his Christian faith. Perhaps most shockingly, he came to question the value of academic theological education. “I no longer believe in the university,” he wrote to a friend, “in fact I never really have believed in it.”20 Yet, as he expresses in another letter, this loss of confidence in the academy presented one particular challenge: “It’s just that I am concerned about the students.”

Acknowledging the impasse between a defunct form of theological education and the ongoing need to form church leaders, he held out hope—“Perhaps other ways will be open to me.”21

In Bonhoeffer’s mind, the confessing seminary at Finkenwalde was precisely this “other way,” an opportunity to overcome the education-training dichotomy that characterized theological

21 Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 410; cf. Bonhoeffer, DBWE 13, 152.
education in the German academy. Bonhoeffer refers to it as a chance to blaze a new trail by combining scholarly and practical work. In a letter to Barth he refers to it as a “completely different kind of training.” Discipleship was, after all, more than an intellectual exercise, so training in Christian faithfulness must be a holistic endeavor, the formation of a way of life, an education of body, mind, and heart.

Importantly for the hermeneutical argument I am making in this chapter, Bonhoeffer’s move away from the academy corresponded with his fresh discovery of the Bible. He recounts in a letter to a friend that the “extremely un-Christian” ambition that characterized his early academic pursuits was disrupted when he came to the Bible “for the first time.” This encounter with Scripture entailed more than a simple admiration for the stories and ideas expressed therein; it involved, as he writes, the conviction “that God is speaking to us in the Bible.”

He structured his educational experiment at Finkenwalde as the corollary of this claim, as a lived attempt at developing the “ears to hear” appropriate to God’s revelatory speech. This was a highly spiritual endeavor. Yet Bonhoeffer recognized that the Spirit is bound to the words of Scripture. He was therefore alert the deeply hermeneutical nature of this task. In an age when various competing spirits were vying for influence in the church, he recognized that Christian

22 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 253.
23 Ibid., 134.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 167.
26 Ibid., 178.
27 Ibid., 133.
faithfulness requires fresh attention to Scripture and the formation of a posture of attentiveness to Christ’s word in and through it.  

Accordingly, when he attempts to summarize the essential purpose of this new community, he consistently focuses on the task of hermeneutical faithfulness. “Our main concern,” he writes, “is that the Bible be read and prayed again” in churches. This is a pressing task, for students are “empty…with regard to familiarity with the Bible.” They are approaching the task of ministry with new questions: “How can I learn to pray? How can I learn to read Scripture?” In a letter to Barth he claims that his guiding purpose at Finkenwalde is to help students learn to pray and read the Bible—“Either we can help them do this, or we can’t help them at all.”

It therefore comes as no surprise when Bonhoeffer frankly admits that Scripture “stands at the center of our work” and that “the candidate [in the seminary] will seek constant contact with the Holy Scriptures.” “Rather than ritual, it will be the word of the Bible itself and prayer that will guide them through the day.”

Given Bonhoeffer’s stated convictions, it is not a stretch to claim that his experiment in education and communal living was a sustained attempt at training in hermeneutical faithfulness. To be sure, it was most fundamentally a training in lived orientation toward the living God, which

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28 Ibid., 59-60.
29 Ibid., 271.
30 Ibid., 253; also see 278.
31 Ibid., 254.
32 Ibid., 253-254.
33 Ibid., 111.
34 Ibid., 172.
35 Ibid., 97. For other similar statements, see Ibid., 196, 217.
entails (but is not limited to) the practice of reading Scripture. But Bonhoeffer assumed that the ability to engage faithfully with Scripture constituted the foundation of a posture of openness and attentiveness to Christ.

Given his commitments regarding the nature of discipleship and the bodiliness of Christian faithfulness, it is no accident that he located hermeneutical training within the context of communal life. The communal nature of interpretive faithfulness is one of the most underappreciated dimension of Bonhoeffer’s scriptural hermeneutic. While scholars have focused on his actual methods for handling the text and his theological construal of God’s action in the hermeneutical process, they have directed sparse attention to the essentially social nature of theological interpretation in his thought.36 The reason for this, perhaps, is that the communal nature of hermeneutics is more evident in his practice than in his theory. Moreover, Bonhoeffer himself admits that hermeneutics was something he did and not something he theorized.37 I suggest, however, that when we consider what Finkenwalde was all about—instilling a posture of openness and attentiveness to the risen Christ—and then when we attend to the actual practices Bonhoeffer prescribed to reach this end, it becomes evident that in his mind practices of togetherness are integral to faithful reading.

Hermeneutical practices of togetherness are necessary precisely because Christ is risen and verbally active. Because Christ speaks, communities must learn to listen. While Bonhoeffer expected

36 The major exception is Fowl and Jones, Reading in Communion.

37 It appears that hermeneutical questions were at the forefront of Bonhoeffer’s mind during his time at Finkenwalde, even if he was unable to pursue them formally; see Ibid., 273: “I am hoping to finish my book during the course of this semester [i.e., Discipleship], after which I would really like to try my hand at a book on hermeneutics. There seems to me to be a very great gap here.” It seems that Bonhoeffer abandoned this plan in order to take up the issues he pursues in Ethics, which presumably appeared more pressing due to political circumstances. One could argue that his initial interest in hermeneutics lies behind his turn toward the “non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts” in prison.
this word from Christ to be direct, even personal, he never pretended that it would be easily discerned, as if “hearing Christ” were a mystical moment of lucidity. Rather than a mystical encounter, Christ’s speech requires the careful communal work of discovery and discernment. To borrow a phrase from J. Louis Martyn, Bonhoeffer’s communal efforts at Finkenwalde aim to facilitate the formation of an “addressable community.”

According to Martyn, God’s grace changes the nature of human agency; though the community obviously consists of individual agents, when called by Christ it becomes an agent itself. Drawn together by the Spirit, this corporate agent becomes fit for God’s address, an addressable community. As I argue below, the array of practices that characterize the Finkenwalde community are premised on the conviction that what the Spirit does to create addressable communities must take shape corporately. That is to say, the practices of togetherness that structure and sustain common life stand as Bonhoeffer’s attempt to foster addressability.

A fairly straightforward conviction animates Bonhoeffer’s vision at this point: “God puts his word in the mouth of other Christians.” He continues,

[Christians] watch for this Word wherever they can…It has come and comes daily and anew in the Word of Jesus Christ…But God put this Word into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others…God has willed that we should seek and find God’s living Word in the testimony of other Christians…Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God’s Word to them.

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40 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 5, 32.
For Bonhoeffer, hearing God and hearing others within the church are mutually reciprocating events. To have one without the other, in his estimate, is to compromise the logic of the church as a space for receiving Christ’s address. He claims, in short, that the process of gathering and sustaining communicative fellowship with others is integral to the very logic of revelation.

The Christocentrism that decentsers the interpretive subject (which I noted in Part One) takes corporate shape through the alterity of those within the community. One of the main ways Jesus calls his followers into question is through calling them to bump shoulders with others—not the others they choose, but the others who respond to Christ’s call. While this conviction is most evident at Finkenwalde, it was present earlier in his career as well. It is no coincidence that Bonhoeffer’s famous petition for Christians to read “against ourselves” occurs within the context of an ecumenical conference. Within such a gathering, the difference inherent to the church’s unity-in-distinction becomes especially pronounced. Precisely through this difference Scripture stands “against” the church and can be heard as an alien word.41 The decentering involved in gathering with others around Christ forges, at least in part, the leverage by which Scripture challenges and changes its readers, and in this it functions as the concrete corollary of Christ’s own decentering presence. Here lies the value of diverse hermeneutical communities. If we control or manipulate the identities of those with whom we engage in the hermeneutical process, it is a safe bet that interpretive outcomes will be agreeable to our preconceived sensibilities. In this, the threat of a divine Doppelgänger continues to lurk.

In fact, much of Bonhoeffer’s own theological development is attributable to God’s grace confronting him through the diverse bodies with which he shared space. Consider, as perhaps the

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41 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11, 378.
leading example, his participation in Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. As scholars are coming to recognize, Bonhoeffer’s involvement with this community expanded his theological imagination in key ways; it taught him to recognize Jesus’ active and personal presence, to affirm a theology of vicarious solidarity with the oppressed, and to develop a concrete account of the *theologia crucis*.\(^{42}\)

Other examples abound. His pacifism arose through friendship with Jean Lasserre, a French theologian he met in the United States. His experiences in Rome as a student first awakened him to the beauty of the universal church that was often muted in German Lutheranism. His communal experiment at Finkenwalde was largely based on Anglican monasteries and free-church schools he experienced while in England. Bonhoeffer was so convinced that God’s grace is encountered in others (even outside the church) that he famously contemplated spending time in India learning from Gandhi’s example of communal life.\(^{43}\) Bonhoeffer was convinced, in other words, that just as Jesus mediates others, others mediate Jesus. To borrow a phrase from Rowan Williams, other people are “where God happens.”\(^{44}\) To cast this in specifically hermeneutical terms, Scripture gains significance—it comes alive—in the context of togetherness.

**Practices of Togetherness within the *Creatura Verbi***

The hermeneutical importance of bodies gathered plays out in Bonhoeffer’s account of communal practices. If God wants people to speak God’s word to each other, they must attend to

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\(^{43}\) Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 408.

the conditions by which this speaking can occur. Thus Bonhoeffer places unusual significance on the literal act of verbalizing Scripture. If the human mouth is the medium of God’s word, we must learn to speak the words of Scripture to one another in a manner appropriate to the task. Because the mouth is merely a medium, it should not become the object of focal attention. Consequently, Bonhoeffer argues that the public readings of Scripture should be “plain and simple,” more focused on the subject matter than on rhetorical flourish. He further contends that one should avoid “tendentious speaking,” “logical and aesthetic tricks,” and “flowery speech.” To read without simple humility is to divert attention to oneself instead of the word.

In an oft-quoted line, he writes, “Proper reading of Scripture is not a technical exercise that can be learned; it is something that grows or diminishes according to my own spiritual condition.” Commentators commonly reference this as proof that Bonhoeffer operated with a properly theological hermeneutic. Of course, this is true. Yet what is startling about this line is that he is here referring to the literal event of reading Scripture aloud, to the literal act of vocalizing the text in a communal gathering, not to the theoretical process of understanding the text. His concern is with the act of reading in the most concrete and basic sense. While he certainly recognized the spiritual and theological dimensions of understanding, he was equally concerned with the logic of bodies gathered, with the way these bodies might mediate Jesus to each other, and hence with the various practices that facilitate this gathering and speaking.

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45 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 5, 64.
46 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 503-4.
47 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 5, 64.
48 Ibid.
While this line of thinking might seem conceptually unsophisticated, Bonhoeffer believed that the seemingly mundane practices entailed in shaping togetherness are integral to the process of forming an addressable community. For this reason, communal life at Finkenwalde was explicitly marked by an array of practices intended, at the most basic level, to facilitate physical proximity and promote camaraderie. For example, he insisted that students make intentional efforts to develop genuine friendships. As one community member recounts, he implemented the rule that “during the session every member of the community was to take at least one long walk with every other member.”

He likewise insisted that students learn to play together. Although communal life was ultimately a Christological endeavor, Bonhoeffer “regarded the inability to enjoy leisure time as a gap in student’s education” and “found virtue in spontaneity and play, regarding leisure as a means of soul craft.” He insisted that students learn to share meals together. The “gracious omnipresence” of Christ, he claimed “is actualized when Christians break bread in fellowship…In a special way, the daily breaking of bread together binds Christians to their Lord and to one another.” For Bonhoeffer, this is a robustly bodily exercise: “We share our bread. Thus we are firmly bound to one another not only in the Spirit, but with our whole physical being.” He insisted that students learn to sing together, for singing creates unity in the Word. “I can hardly imagine our life together here

50 Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 464.
52 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 5, 73.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 67.
without daily music making.” He insisted that the community engage in acts of hospitality. “We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God, who will thwart our plans and frustrate our ways time and again, even daily, by sending people across our path with their demands and requests.” Practically, this played out in the community’s active willingness to host retreats and accommodate large groups of guests. As one former member recounts, one of the reasons for choosing Finkenwalde as a site for the seminary was its many rooms and its conduciveness to acts of hospitality.

Other practices at Finkenwalde are more obviously theological, yet equally concrete in their ability to form and sustain communal life. Bonhoeffer insisted, for example, on the practice of the personal confession of sin, for “in confession there takes place a breakthrough to community.” He insisted that students learn to pray for each other. This act creates genuine togetherness, he claims, for “I can no longer condemn or hate other Christians for whom I pray.” He insisted that students learn to serve each other, for mutual service hinders the natural drive toward self-assertion and breaks down walls of separation. In all of this, he was perhaps most concerned to train his students in the art of conversation, at the heart of which lies linguistic patience, the ability to listen to others with genuine attentiveness, recognizing that on the day of judgment one will have to give an account

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55 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 279.
56 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 5, 99.
57 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 89, 94.
58 Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 433.
59 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 5, 110.
60 Ibid., 90.
61 Ibid., 94.
for all wasted words (cf., Matt. 12:36). “The first service one owes to others in the community,” he claims, “involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them.”

In order to curtail linguistic waste, one must learn to cultivate the art of silence. Within a community created by Christ’s address, silence is more basic than speech. “The Word comes not to the noise-makers but to those who are silent,” Bonhoeffer suggests. As Marsh notes, here explicating the logic of Bonhoeffer’s communal experiment, “Holy silence reawakens and refreshes, making strange once more the mystery of the Word.” This posture of silence and the art of listening it produces is especially relevant vis-à-vis the preached word. For Bonhoeffer, the task of listening to sermons is a skill that one must deliberately cultivate. As Bethge recounts, even the practice sermons students wrote for preaching class “were treated in all seriousness as the expression of the true and living voice of Christ. Nothing, insisted Bonhoeffer, is more concrete than the real voice of Christ speaking in the sermon.” The sermon “was to be listened to in all humility, not analyzed.” As one student recounts, “Nothing was as chastening as Bonhoeffer’s own method of listening to sermons...Homiletics began with the most difficult lesson of all—one’s own listening to sermons.”

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62 Ibid., 98.
63 Ibid., 84.
64 Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 239.
65 Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 441-442.
66 Ibid., 442.
67 Ibid.
Upon a foundation of silence and listening, true dialogue becomes possible. Earlier I noted Hauerwas’ similar account of patience and hermeneutical discourse. Here Bonhoeffer adds Christological thickness to this notion. If Christ mediates relationships, then, as we have seen, entrance into his community neither dissolves one’s individuality into a monochromatic mass nor establishes atomistic structures of conflict. With Christ, community entails neither bland homogeneity nor the contractual binding of independent egos. This tensional unity-in-distinction funds a distinct set of language practices. The communal struggle for truth is not a game of competition or manipulation, not a veneer hiding a contest of agendas jostling for advantage. Through the togetherness that Christ’s ongoing life creates, communal dialogue can occur without devolving into competition (the linguistic corollary of individualism) or the glib reinforcement of groupthink (the linguistic corollary of collectivism).

Such linguistic activity requires practice, which is why, as Bethge recounts, “One evening a week was devoted to discussion of current issues.” These open-ended discussions often involved contentious issues and thereby functioned as training in a form of dialogue that concretely instantiates the posture of listening and receptivity inherent to the church as the creatura verbi. For Bonhoeffer, to put the matter simply, the process of living in attentive orientation to Christ requires

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68 The structure of daily life sustains the dialectic between individual and community. Bonhoeffer encouraged individual members of the community to spend time alone, yet even this practice was bracketed by the community, for the individual always moves from time alone to time with others. Bonhoeffer obviously recognized that Christians can and at times should read the Bible as solitary individuals. But he could never imagine the notion of an essentially private reading. An individual, even when physically alone, always exists in differentiated unity with the community. Even the practice of silent meditation, which was central to Bonhoeffer’s vision of spiritual discipline at Finkenwalde, had a communal dimension, for individuals mediated on a shared text, communally reflected on their experiences, and occasionally meditated in pairs or larger groups (see Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 933-935).

69 Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 430.
intensive dialogue and discernment. The social and conversational skills that sustain life together constitute, at least in part, the “ears to hear” appropriate to Christ’s ongoing reign.

These practices can at times seem awkwardly intimate, perhaps even idealistic. But when enacted they create a community characterized by mutual vulnerability, by a sense of shared trust in which the truth of Christ—and the falsehood of our wandering ways—can be identified peacefully. Bonhoeffer was searching, in other words, for the social conditions necessary for “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). His point is not that such speech should become easy. Naming sin and falsehood never is. But communities that seek to follow Christ should strive to foster the social conditions by which such naming can occur, by which the word of a sister or brother can be heard as the word of Christ himself. Taken together, these practices illustrate Bonhoeffer’s larger desire to form a community fit to live in attentive orientation to Christ and bear his address. For this reason, practices of togetherness are not ancillary to the hermeneutical process but are part and parcel with the task of hearing Christ in and through the text.

In this, Bonhoeffer shows how a theory of revelation remains abstract without a practical corollary. If Christ speaks, the community must listen, and this act of listening must be enacted and sustained by practices of togetherness. The receptivity of Christian life vis-à-vis the risen Christ takes concrete form as receptivity vis-à-vis brothers and sisters. There is no turning to Christ without also turning to those in the community. The act of gathering remains a receptive activity: we receive Christ’s call and, subsequently, receive we brothers and sisters who likewise receive us.

By this I am not claiming that human works of community building are a prerequisite for receiving God’s address, as if this social vision functions as a works-based hermeneutical righteousness in which communal virtues, in and of themselves, produce faithful interpretive
outcomes. I continue to affirm that the gathering of bodies is, ultimately, Christ’s work through the Spirit. “Eyes of faith” are always only a gift, the reception of which is an ongoing communal event.

**Adjudication in the Church**

This account of practices of togetherness and the communal discourse they enable draws us into a question that has been looming in the background until this point: how does the church deal with interpretive conflict? The obvious reality is that different readers are bound to handle the text differently and are thus bound to make differing proposals about which interpretive outcomes are most faithful to it. How do we discern the fittingness of these claims?

The hermeneutic of discipleship I have been sketching prevents us from settling such debates by means of a mere theory of textual meaning. To be sure, the Spirit fights only through the text of Scripture, as Bonhoeffer maintains. Any supposedly private revelation must be brought into judgment by the text itself. Even so, final adjudication regarding the content of interpretive faithfulness cannot be settled on the basis of the text alone. The ground of interpretive faithfulness ultimately lies with Christ himself.

The theological rationale for this claim begins to emerge in the famous section in *Discipleship* in which Bonhoeffer combats the prevalence of cheap grace. Here he is particularly concerned about those who twist Luther’s true statements about grace and render them false by positing them in abstraction from discipleship. “Grace as presupposition is grace at its cheapest; grace as a conclusion is costly grace…It is the same word of the justification by grace alone, and yet false use of the same
statement can lead to a complete destruction of its essence.”70 He sums up this line of thinking: “That means that knowledge cannot be separated from the existence in which it was acquired.”71 “The words are true,” he elsewhere writes, “but they have no weight.”72 To be sure, this gets to the heart of Bonhoeffer’s notion of discipleship, yet it also points toward a distinct, and fairly radical, hermeneutical vision. He is suggesting that the same semantic claim can be either true or false, depending on the conditions of the situation in which it is spoken.73

In relation to a living Christ, the notion of truth takes on new dimensions. As Bonhoeffer claims in Ethics, truth “is the real itself…not the abstractly real that is separated from the reality of God, but the real that has its reality only in God.”74 Such reality, of course, is found in Christ, who alone is “the Real one” in whom “all reality is taken on and summed up.”75 Bonhoeffer here suggests that any claim to truth apart from Christ remains at best partial, an abstraction. He suggests, in other words, that because the ultimate truthfulness of a statement derives from its relation to the Real one, it cannot be reduced to a semantic formula. The truthfulness of a statement finally lies not in the words themselves or in their relationship to a certain historical or ideological referent but in the way they fit to Jesus. A true statement, a true doctrine, a true interpretation—all remain false when posited apart from the act of following the Lord. Indeed, any attempt to interpret Scripture apart

70 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 51.
71 Ibid.
72 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 371.
73 For this line of thinking, I owe a debt to J. Patrick Dunn, whose dissertation at Stellenbosch University picks up similar themes. See J. Patrick Dunn, “‘To Know the Real One’: Christological Promethey in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” (MTh Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2016) and “Prophets, Faust, and First-Years: Bonhoeffer and the Language of Charismatic Experience,” Stellenbosch Theological Journal, 2, no. 2 (2016): 39-56.
74 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 50.
75 Ibid., 263.
from discipleship distorts Scripture itself. “Fundamentally eliminating simple obedience introduces a principle of scripture foreign to the Gospel. According to it, in order to understand scripture, one must first have a key to interpreting it. But that key would not be the living Christ himself in judgment and grace.”

Bonhoeffer states the matter baldly: “The problem of following Christ shows itself here to be a hermeneutical problem.”

Bonhoeffer was aware that this line of thinking radically challenges conventional hermeneutical paradigms. He willingly complexifies the task of understanding Scripture. Speaking specifically of Matthew 5-7, he writes, “We have heard the Sermon on the Mount; perhaps we have understood it. But who has heard it correctly?” Bonhoeffer wants us to see that in relation to the living Christ, the question of hermeneutical truth cannot be reduced to the question, “what does this text mean?” He would have us ask a more dynamic and concrete question: which claims about the text have greater purchase on truth? Or, even more concretely: how do various readings open us to the Truthful one? Thus what Bonhoeffer says about the pursuit of ethical decisions holds equally for the pursuit of hermeneutical decisions: “We can and should speak not about what the good is, can be, or should be for each and every time, but about how Christ may take form among us today and here.”

Bonhoeffer is suggesting, in other words, that the overarching question that drives Christian reading is “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” In pursuit of Christ, the church should ask of the text: How does it alert us to his ongoing call? Which claims about the text open us to his movement and allow us to witness to his ongoing work? In the wake of Christ, “meaning” is therefore not a

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76 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 82.  
77 Ibid.  
78 Ibid., 181, emphasis added.  
79 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 99.
calculable commodity or a fixed quantify. Proposals regarding the truthfulness of competing interpretive outcomes cannot be adjudicated vis-à-vis a static and empirically available yardstick (e.g., authorial intention, the literal sense, original meaning). Even if an interpretation could be deemed semantically true in some empirically verifiable sense, it may nevertheless remain abstract. It may nevertheless fail to conform to Reality. The point is not the words, Bonhoeffer wants us to see, but the way they refer to Jesus—not an idea or doctrine about Jesus, but the living one himself. “Meaning” in this deeper sense is tantamount to active and embodied conformity to Christ. In this, Bonhoeffer presages later hermeneutical developments by implying that language cannot be abstracted from a way of being in the world. The problem he addresses in Discipleship is not simply that one’s interpretation is correct while the application is wrong. He refuses to tease the two apart. Because our knowledge of God and the language we use to refer to God are bound up in a form of life in pursuit of God, the interpretation-application distinction carries little weight.

Framing the issue in this way certainly does not solve the hermeneutical dilemma. In a sense, it only makes the matter more perplexing. But it does allow us to make a few claims regarding the nature of interpretive decisions. First, within the framework of discipleship, hermeneutical outcomes are not black and white—not simply right or wrong or good or bad. Just as with one’s ongoing imitation of Jesus, readings are faithful to a greater or lesser degree. Indeed, by replacing the qualifier “good” with the notion of “faithfulness,” we can more accurately depict what is happening in the hermeneutical process.

It follows, second, that when we locate the hermeneutical process within the framework of discipleship, concrete examples of “good interpretation” are not easily ascertained. Those within contemporary debates about theological interpretation have increasingly (and rightly) demanded examples of it, actual instantiations of a good theological hermeneutic. But even this demand can
too easily remain beholden to the logic of academic space, for the desired example is almost always another written text. Yet if faithful reading is intimately entwined with Christ’s ongoing movement and the community’s ongoing participation in him, the object to be adjudicated becomes slippery, as elusive as Christ himself. Examples of interpretive faithfulness are utterly time-bound and dated. We are reminded of Bonhoeffer’s belief that although faithfulness is always visible, it is not empirically available. Objective methods of study that identify a stable and quantifiable object remain open to rigorous and methodologically controlled process of policing. But a hermeneutic of discipleship requires us to sit loosely with such procedures.

Third, we thus admit that final adjudicatory certainty lies beyond our reach. Within the framework of discipleship, the hermeneutical process exists within an eschatological horizon. We are operating here with a hermeneutic en route. Between resurrection and parousia, our sight remains dim. For this reason, Bonhoeffer writes that “we cannot know with ultimate certainty” the extent to which “a human action serves the divine goal of history.”

En route, we lack access to an unambiguous standard by which to make such claims. As he was well aware, Christ’s address does not lend itself to critical scrutiny. At his most anti-hermeneutical he even suggests that interpretation is inaction and thus disobedience. By this he clearly does not mean that the process of discernment is unfaithful; he trained his students for just this task. It does mean, however, that even the act of interpretation, if severed from the act of following, is nothing but a sophisticated attempt to evade the force of the text. To map criteria and methods that would equip one to lay hold of Christ’s voice

80 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 227.
81 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 182.
is to succumb again to humanity’s original temptation to be *sicut dens.* Following after Christ, we make interpretive judgments in a provisional and ongoing manner, for Christ remains on the move. To conclusively adjudicate an interpretation by means of method would the hermeneutical equivalent of cheap grace, grace secured as a principle and not from the living one himself.

*Making Judgments*

All of this makes the need for adjudication even more acutely evident. If carelessly handled, a hermeneutic of discipleship risks opening the door to interpretive anarchy. To resist stable and determinate accounts of textual meaning is not tantamount to saying that anything goes. Even with the above qualifications in place, it nevertheless remains the case that some renditions of the text conform to Christ more closely than others and that the church must reject faithless readings. So this again raises the question: to what extent can we make judgments about various renditions of the text, and how might we go about coming to such conclusions? While we should insist on the value of a wide variety of interpretive outcomes, we can make a few claims that frame the task of hermeneutical judgment and prevent it from spilling over into chaos.

First, and perhaps most obviously, is the foundation of discipleship itself. The most basic thing to say about the task of adjudicating interpretive conflict is that claims to truth should arise from a form of life that takes shape in Jesus’ wake. This is not to deny the possibility of truth arising outside of discipleship. It is to say, however, that hearing the text as Christ’s address is necessarily bound up with the process of following. This distinctly Bonhoefferian rendering of the Augustinian *credo ut intelligam* implies that in order to adjudicate one must first follow.

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82 On this, see Bonhoeffer, DBWE 3, 111-114.
This vision of knowledge resonates with the scriptural depiction of discipleship. Christ only asks “Who do you say that I am?” after first inviting the disciples to “put down your nets and follow me.” One’s cognitive relationship to truth is contingent upon one’s bodily enactment of a relationship with the Lord. In Paul’s idiom, we present our bodies as sacrifices in order then to be “transformed by the renewing of the mind” (Rom. 12:1-2). Knowledge and action are inextricably bound—as Bonhoeffer famously writes, “only the believers obey; only the obedient believe.”

It comes as no surprise, then, when Bonhoeffer asserts that a community is needed for discernment and that isolation is the enemy of sound judgment. If we cannot sketch a precise method or technique that will determine the truthfulness of competing interpretive proposals, we can sketch an account of the posture from which truthfulness might emerge, and this posture is fundamentally social. Scripture’s paradigmatic instance of discernment takes just this form: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). In this chapter I have been sketching an account of how this “and to us” might be enacted and sustained.

Within a hermeneutic of discipleship, we can reframe the task of adjudication. We can forgo the pursuit of methodologically-driven certainty and, in its place, embrace the communal process. In the place of criteria, we have a form of life. In the place of certainty, we have the ongoing journey. The rules for adjudication, then, are the rules that allow the community to navigate the process of hearing Christ’s voice. Bonhoeffer’s vision of education and formation was inclined toward this question. He claims that the very purpose of theological education is the discernment of the spirits

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83 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 63.
84 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 96, 117.
85 On this, see Stephen Fowl, Engaging Scripture, 103-113.
in the church.\textsuperscript{86} As we have seen, he structured his Finkenwalde experiment as a sustained attempt at forming a community capable of doing just this.

This is where Hauerwas’ account of patience is so helpful. Without the ability to maintain open dialogue, the community is bound to short-circuit the discernment process. Fowl and Jones highlight the specifically hermeneutical implications inherent within Hauerwas’ vision: “No particular community of believers can be sure of what a faithful interpretation of Scripture will entail in any specific situation until it actually engages in the hard process of conversation, argument, discussion, prayer, and practice.”\textsuperscript{87} John Howard Yoder refers to this as a “hermeneutic of peoplehood.” He suggests that various practices are necessary to structure a communal process of moral reasoning in which conflict is managed and truth pursued. Within his communal account of ethical deliberation he notes that the process of deliberation is less a matter of how ideas work than a matter of how community’s work.\textsuperscript{88} For our purposes, we might modify Yoder’s insight: pursuing hermeneutical faithfulness is not merely a matter of how texts work. Rather, interpretive faithfulness arises in the process of following after Jesus, and it is bracketed by the practices that structure and sustain a common life en route with him. Before we can make a claim to adjudicate readings we must attend to the communal process that would enable such a claim in the first place.

Yoder’s insights are especially fitting in this chapter, for he intends his hermeneutic of peoplehood to mediate the type of tensions that might arise between a Christological and institutional hermeneutic (Parts 1 and 2 of this project). Yoder presents his hermeneutic of

\textsuperscript{86} Bonhoeffer, DBWE 12, 432-435. Also see DBWE 14, 95-96, 402.

\textsuperscript{87} Fowl and Jones, \textit{Reading in Communion}, 20. Also see Fowl’s \textit{Engaging Scripture}, chapters 3-4.

\textsuperscript{88} Yoder, “Hermeneutic of Peoplehood,” 52.
peoplehood as a constructive response to the respective extremes of hyper-individualism and hyper-
magisterialism. In contrast to an individual’s own intuition vis-à-vis the revealing God and in
contrast to blind repetition of authoritative claims, meaning must always be navigated via a
communal process. This fits nicely into the structure of this project. One of the main ways we
combat onesided accounts of individualistic intuition (one of the dangers of locating hermeneutics
with the *creatura verbi*) and rigid traditionalism (one of the dangers of locating hermeneutics within
the historical institution) is through the gathering of bodies.

Yet all of this seems only to delay the question. Once we have sketched the fundamental
communal process and posture by which faithful reading can be pursued and identified, we must still
attend to the community’s critical responsibility vis-à-vis interpretive possibilities. By “critical
responsibility” I refer to the community’s ability to rule out certain interpretive outcomes. While the
positive content of a given outcomes is determined by Christ’s ongoing freedom as the risen Lord,
the community must judiciously and humbly exercise a critical vigilance as one aspect of the larger
process of receiving his voice. If we cannot speak for Christ, we can identify competing voices that
might lead us astray.

Here we recall the distinction between Scripture’s sacramental and regulative capacity. As I
argued in chapter 1, Scripture functions most fundamentally as the medium of Christ’s address and
the means by which the Spirit draw us into Christ’s ongoing movement. At the same time, Scripture
regulates the discernment process. As we have seen, the vigilant community must attend to the text
itself, for this is where the Spirit speaks. An outcome that loses the text must be treated with
suspicion. But how does a community determine whether a reading has lost the text? Here my
analysis in Part Two remains significant. Scripture functions in a regulative mode precisely as a
narrative of God’s redemption. That is, one of the means by which the church determines whether it
has in fact received Christ’s word is the degree to which a given interpretive outcome fits within the larger story of God’s coming kingdom. Thus, the church’s inherited traditions—the memory that has accrued as the church has lived into its story—help sketch interpretive bounds. As one aspect of its critical responsibility, the church can ask if a proposed interpretive outcome fits within the broad contours of the tradition. Do claims about Jesus’ “isness” resonate with the memory of his “wasness”?

Of course, reading within the boundaries of the narrative and the tradition is not tantamount to reading faithfully. Boundaries do not deliver positive content. In an athletic endeavor, for example, knowing the rules of the game does not make one a skilled player; one can obey all the rules and still fail at the game. It is what we do when we are not breaking the rules that matters. But sketching a broad rule at least alerts us to readings that might deserve critical attention. Such criteria can help reveal interpretive failure and mitigate interpretive violence even if they cannot, in and of themselves, positively determine interpretive outcomes. Thus I continue to affirm that the process of adjudicating readings, like the process of pursuing hermeneutical faithfulness itself, is more an art than a science, which is why the cultivation of imagination and innovation remains vital to the church’s exercise of hermeneutical responsibility.

**Conclusion: Hauerwas, Bonhoeffer, and the Church as a Communal Space**

Life together can be messy. Ideas that function in the abstract, that an isolated individual can deal with as conceptualities in her head, possess a neatness that is frustrated by the sheer there-ness of other bodies. The church is a space for reading because in it we must manage the proximity of others, because being in the church means bumping shoulders with those diverse others Christ has called to himself.
The main argument in Part Three is that this bumping of shoulders is integral to the hermeneutical process. I have claimed that both the *creatura verbi* and the historical institution require concrete communal enactment and remain hermeneutically vacuous without it. The vertical and horizontal intersect where bodies gather around Jesus. Since no method can lay hold of divine speech, I have suggested that the church must attend to the posture from which it seeks understanding and from which it enacts critical responsibility; this posture, I have argued, is unreservedly communal, a matter of bodies gathered through practices of togetherness.

This obviously is not meant to downplay the extent to which this process is also textual. Yet as both Bonhoeffer and Hauerwas exemplify, the task of reading the text rightly cannot be sequestered from the task of enacting community with other disciples. In this regard, the two have offered mutually reinforcing visions: the church becomes a hermeneutical space by means practices of togetherness that allow communities to gather around the text.

This is not to suggest that they have offered identical visions. Indeed, they have achieved different goals. Hauerwas has shown how the narrative logic of Jesus requires togetherness. Given Jesus’ identity, a community that embodies his narrative across time—i.e., the church as a historical institution—requires bodies gathered. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, has shown how the church as the *creatura verbi* requires bodies gathered in order to function as a hermeneutical space. For him, practices of togetherness function according to the logic of the resurrection. A risen and verbal Lord calls forth an addressable community.

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89 Bonhoeffer realized that engaging in practices of togetherness is not an excuse to abandon close readings of Scripture. During his Finkenwalde classes, for example, he required his students to read and memorize the text in the original language and to use an assortment of scholarly aids in the process of listening to the text (see, e.g., DBWE 14, 173). If the Spirit is inseparably bound to Holy Scripture, as Bonhoeffer avers, then careful attention to the text is in fact a spiritual discipline.
There is a way of reading Hauerwas’ scriptural hermeneutic that makes this theoretical joining quite difficult. On this reading, Hauerwas’ ecclesiocentrism and Bonhoeffer’s discipleship motif seem to offer contrary visions of Christian life. According to the ecclesiocentric reading, practices of togetherness serve merely to support the diachronic propagation of the church. But by drawing attention to underappreciated aspects of Hauerwas’ theology, I have suggested another possibility for construing his hermeneutical vision. Practices of togetherness can also function hermeneutically by enabling a community to navigate conflict and change as it journeys toward the kingdom. Framed in this way, such practices sustain the church as a dynamic entity that corresponds to Christ’s livelihood. Even if Hauerwas is not always as clear as he could be, Bonhoeffer’s voice helps draw out the journey motif that is sometimes only latent in his work. This motif and the concomitant notion of hard-wrought movement in the tradition produces an account of hermeneutical practices that synchronizes nicely with the hermeneutic of discipleship I have been expressing in this work. In this sense, I have attempted to read Hauerwas and Bonhoeffer together. Whether analyzed as a historical institution or as the creatura verbi, the task of living faithfully as the church requires an overlapping array of embodied practices and activities, a thick way of life.

This way of life, I have suggested, enables the process of adjudication within the church. Indeed, the task of adjudication as I have here sketched it is a fitting culmination of my analysis to this point. The first three Parts of this project necessarily work together in the process of adjudicating interpretive disputes. Part One sketched an account of practices of un-mastery and receptivity that situate the church to receive Christ’s address. Here in chapter 6 I have analyzed Bonhoeffer’s practices of togetherness as an example of the concrete communal practices that sustain and enable the ongoing process of listening. Having enacted a receptive posture, the church then has a critical responsibility. Has it in fact heard from Christ, or is it hearing the voice of
another? In chapters 3 and 4 I sketched an account of tradition and innovation that helps provide some of the criteria by which the community can make such a judgment—does it fit with the text, with the narrative, and with the tradition? Here in chapter 6 I have shown how practices of togetherness are required to sustain the communal process in which these criteria are applied to a particular moment, thereby situating the church to discern the degree to which a given reading opens the community to Christ.

Yet one key criterion of interpretive faithfulness remains to be considered. With this, we direct our gaze to Part Four. If faithful reading derives from the particularity of Christ’s ongoing movement, then the interpretive community must attend to the interpretive moment, to the ways God’s ongoing mission takes shape in a given location. The basic conviction underlying this claim is straightforward: interpretive faithfulness is context specific. The community’s interpretive process must account for the church’s mission in a particular time and place. We must ask, in other words: what does Reality look like here and now? Yet more is on the line here than mere criteria for adjudication. I argue, more fundamentally, that mission shapes the hermeneutical task itself. The church is a space for reading because it is an essentially missional community called to witness to God’s ongoing mission of redemption.
PART FOUR: THE CHURCH AS A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY

In this project I have used the resurrection stories in Luke 24 as an imaginative stimulus for depicting the church as a hermeneutical space. By filtering the Bonhoefferian discipleship motif through the lens of this story, I have been able to articulate an ecclesiology that serves as the location and presupposition for faithful reading. The most obvious feature of the Emmaus Road story is that Christ himself, in the event of drawing near and breaking bread, grants the disciples textual understanding. As I claim in Part One in conversation with John Webster, Jesus himself serves as the ultimate context of interpretive faithfulness. Yet ecclesiology is a complex doctrine that requires the coordination of theological and socio-historical elements. I therefore seek to uphold the asymmetrical unity between divine initiative and creaturely response, thereby coordinating the ultimate and proximate contexts of interpretation within one ecclesial space.

Toward this end, Part Two articulates the historical-institutional context of interpretive faithfulness. In the Emmaus Road story genuine understanding arises as the disciples’ inherited hopes and traditions come into contact with Christ himself. The Christological moment of understanding does not bypass the past but sheds new light upon it, allowing the disciples to see their inheritance in fresh ways. In conversation with Robert Jenson, I suggested that the institutional past becomes hermeneutically operative in the present through various structures of continuity. Though this hermeneutical posture can threaten to obscure Christ himself, Bonhoeffer helps us see how being traditioned into the church can provide the framework and foundation for imaginative performances of discipleship.

In Part Three I suggest that inherited traditions and the presence of Christ collide in the concrete gathering of bodies. The disciples on the road to Emmaus gain understanding as they
gather together around a shared meal. I turn to Stanley Hauerwas in order to sketch a theological account of this togetherness. Hauerwas shows how the concepts of “narrative,” “tradition,” and “institution”—central to recent articulations of theological interpretation—remain hermeneutically vacuous without practices of togetherness that shape and sustain a social space. Though Hauerwas can, at times, over-burden these practices, Bonhoeffer adds Christological depth to Hauerwas’ communal ecclesiology, showing how practices of togetherness constitute the church as an addressable community.

While testifying to the hermeneutical importance of Christ himself, the community’s inherited past, and the concrete gathering of bodies, Luke 24 also points toward the importance of missionary movement. The women, upon remembering, went and “told all this to the eleven and all the rest” (v. 9), a movement which elicits Peter’s own movement toward understanding—“Peter got up and ran to the tomb…then he went home, amazed at what happened” (v. 12). The disciples who gain understanding around the table immediately go and tell others about the good news they have experienced (vv. 33-35). The very next scene in the chapter follows a similar pattern. Within the context of a shared meal, Jesus grants the eleven the gift of scriptural understanding (v. 45). Importantly, this understanding is missionary in nature; understanding what is written about the messiah (v. 46) is bound up with his name moving to the nations (v. 47). Indeed, this hermeneutical event establishes the disciples’ vocation as his witnesses (v. 48) and lays the groundwork for the arrival of the Spirit who will empower that witness (v. 49; Acts 1:8). In both scenes, the hermeneutical moment is also a missional moment.

The Spirit’s arrival in the book of Acts confirms this missional reading of Luke 24. The word must go “to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:47), and it begins that process in Acts 2 as devout Jews “from every nation under heaven” (v. 5) receive the Spirit. The nature of this event
suggests that cultural, geographic, and linguistic diversity are inherent to Christ’s church. Though Acts 2 is sometimes read as the reversal of the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11, other interpretive options are available. Pentecost does not overturn the cultural diversity and mobility that God sanctions in Genesis 11 but unites it in Christ through the Spirit. Pentecost is a moment of plurality and plentitude.¹ As we will see, this carries significant hermeneutical ramifications. If, as Acts 2 suggests, the gospel is to cross cultural boundaries as it moves to all the nations, then acts of translation—and thus interpretation—are essential to the church’s life and witness.

In emphasizing the missional dimension of the community, I continue to uphold the primacy of the risen Christ. Apart from him, the community has no mission at all. Apart from his resurrection the disciples remain huddled behind closed doors (Jn. 20:19), and without his ascension and the gift of the Spirit they wander the road hopeless and alone (Lk. 24:21). The creatura verbi is necessarily a missional community, for when Jesus calls disciples to himself, he calls them to share in his own divine sending (Jn. 20:21).

The movement of mission that Jesus initiates around a shared meal and institutes at Pentecost inaugurates an ongoing hermeneutical process. If the disciples first come to understand around the table in a gift of grace, the Spirit deepens and complexifies this understanding as the Spirit propels them into encounter with diverse others. The gospel’s movement changes the nature of Christianity itself. As Andrew Walls rightly notes, “As Paul and his fellow missionaries explain and translate the significance of the Christ in a world that is Gentile and Hellenistic, that significance

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¹ See, e.g., David W. Congdon, The God Who Saves: A Dogmatic Sketch (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 57-58: “Pentecost is not the overturning of Babel, as is sometimes alleged, but the consecration of Babel. The multiplicity of cultures and languages is seen as a blessing and no longer as a curse.” For another creative take on the Babel text, see Brenda Salter McNeil, Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness, and Justice (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 23-28.
is seen to be greater than anyone had realized before. It is as though Christ himself actually grows through the work of mission.”\(^2\) Leslie Newbigin likewise suggests that the church in mission becomes “a learning community” that presses forward “from a partial to a fuller understanding of the Father’s reign.”\(^3\) Between Jesus’ act of laying a missionary foundation in Luke 24 and Paul’s journey to Rome in Acts 28, the church’s theological imagination grows in ways the first disciples did not foresee. According to Newbigin, the identity of the community has expanded.\(^4\) Mission, therefore, is not simply the result of hermeneutical faithfulness; it is ingredient within it. The movement of the gospel is itself a movement of the church’s theological imagination. Mission, at least in part, is how the church learns to see.

Part Four unpacks this possibility and draws attention to some of the hermeneutical practices that make it possible. I begin in chapter 7 by noting a tension between a robustly ecclesial hermeneutic and a missional hermeneutic. What might it mean to read Scripture both in the church and in encounter with the world? I argue that the ecclesiology implied in much theological interpretation does not adequately allow for the type of expanding identity and hermeneutical nimbleness that Newbigin and others suggest is inherent to a missional community.

After describing the nature of the impasse between ecclesial and missional hermeneutics, I begin constructing a path forward by turning to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Though he is rarely read as a missional theologian, I argue that he should be. More significantly for my larger project, I argue that reading him in this way reveals an ecclesiology fit to house a missional hermeneutic. I then turn in

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\(^4\) Ibid., 182.
chapter 8 to expand on the nature of this hermeneutic. William Stringfellow is my primary guide in this task, for he develops the specifically hermeneutical implications of a missional ecclesiology, a task toward which Bonhoeffer gestures in his prison writings but was unable to undertake in a sustained manner.
Chapter 7: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic: Bonhoeffer, Church, and World

This dissertation grows from the conviction that much of what passes as “theological interpretation” or “ecclesial hermeneutics” presupposes a particular ecclesiology. Oftentimes, this presupposition remains implicit. Even so, it is never neutral. I have labored in previous chapters to bring what is hidden into light. In so doing I have diagnosed key issues within this broader movement that deserve critical attention. This chapter continues in this manner.

My basic argument here is that theological interpretation, as the practice is commonly understood today, presupposes an ecclesiology that underplays the missionary character of the church (at best) or is downright anti-missional in nature (at worst).\(^5\) I suggest that the practice of ecclesial hermeneutics often relies upon a normative depiction of the church that cannot adequately account for the polycentric and pluriform effects of the gospel’s worldwide movement. An honest evaluation of what has actually happened in the church’s spread suggests an ecclesiology that differs in key respects from the church implied within theological interpretation.

The way forward requires, in part, that we become attuned to the centrality of mission as a theological theme. Recently, important strides have been made in this direction.\(^6\) Even more

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\(^5\) What I mean by “mission” will become clearer as the chapter progresses. For now, as a means of a simple working definition, I understand it as those various forms of human action that, enabled by the Spirit, witness to Christ’s ongoing work of reconciliation and redemption.

hopefully, scholars are beginning to draw connections between mission and hermeneutics. Yet key questions remain. The burgeoning literature on mission has yet to demonstrate how the church’s missionary nature relates to the task of faithful reading. Specifically, I aim to show how the church as it exists in missionary movement is itself the space within which Christians read faithfully. “Ecclesial hermeneutics” is not merely what happens before missionary movement; to say as much is to suggest that what happens “in mission” is in some sense different from and secondary to what happens “in the church.” It implies, in other words, that to be in missional space is, in fact, not to be in ecclesial space. This further suggests that a hermeneutic that locates Scripture in mission, as much as such a thing exists, is not an ecclesial hermeneutic. We must resist both tendencies. I contend that faithful reading is informed not merely by an idea about mission but by the act itself. In this chapter, therefore, I put forward two mirroring claims: (1) that the recent turn toward ecclesiology in hermeneutics lacks a robustly missional element and, conversely, (2) that the recent turn toward mission in hermeneutics lacks a robustly ecclesial element. My constructive goal in this and the following chapter is to chart a third way by proffering a hermeneutic that is at once genuinely ecclesial and genuinely missional, a mode of reading that is always in the church and for the world.

The Missional Lacuna in Theological Interpretation

The claim that theological interpretation lacks a missional dimension might at first seem surprising. If mission is a key feature of the church’s life, as most Christians believe, it would seem

that a self-consciously ecclesial hermeneutic would be fed and shaped by the task of mission. In actuality, however, this has not been the case. Theological interpretation that explicitly locates itself “in and for the church” often implies that the act of faithful reading and the act of faithful mission take place at a distance from each other.

Consider, for example, the three interlocutors I have engaged in previous chapters. Each offers a uniquely ecclesial hermeneutic, though none attempts to show how the church’s missionary calling might affect its reading practices. The renewed attempt to read Scripture in and as the church has rightly drawn attention to the importance of ecclesially normed “interpretive habits and practices,” but rarely is anything resembling mission included as one of these practices. As the respective bodies of literature on missional theology and theological interpretation each continue to grow, the overlap between the two is surprisingly sparse.

The basic reason animating this situation is simple: if reading Scripture is essentially something that happens within the culture of the church, then any missionary movement outside of the church is a movement away from the context of hermeneutical faithfulness. Such movement necessarily lacks interpretive significance. It may be the byproduct of faithful interpretation, but not an element of interpretation itself.

Several explanations for this divergence can be offered. First, in recent decades the trend toward articulating a distinctly ecclesial hermeneutic has emerged within the ambit of reccurrence.

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7 See, e.g., Fowl’s Engaging Scripture, 9.

8 For a similar view, see Angus Paddison, “Theological Interpretation and the Bible as Public Text,” Journal of Theological Interpretation 8, no. 2 (2014): 175-192. “The effect of such moves [into the church] has been to bring into sharp focus particular moods of theology while leaving under-focused other important strains in theology, not least those that prioritize God’s action in the world and then ask how the church might appropriately respond.” He continues, “Between public theology and theological interpretation as it has been influentially articulated there is a basic divergence in terms of motivation. This divergence has the potential to throw into relief some of the risks of theological interpretation when robustly situated within the culture of the church” (186).
thinking. For many proponents of this movement, theological interpretation has value precisely as a project of ecclesial renewal. The *Brazos Theological Commentary Series*, one of the hermeneutical landmarks of this movement, explicitly frames its task as one of rehabilitation and recovery. It attempts to move behind the Enlightenment to a time before the “animating culture of the church” had been darkened by the “fetters of worldly habit.” Stephen Fowl likewise suggests that the interpretive habits and practices that characterize faithful interpretation are likely pre-modern in nature. There is, of course, an explanation for this tendency. Missiologist David Bosch offers a key reminder when he notes that while “reading theological treatises from earlier centuries, one gets the impression that there was only church, no world.” While there is certainly value in projects of recovery, they risk presupposing a vision of ecclesial space defined within the social conditions of Christendom. For such a church, the marks of faithfulness are interior to the community, which means that missional practice and ecclesial faithfulness do not necessarily coincide.

A second potential explanation for theological interpretation’s missional paucity is the way the “academy” is construed within the movement. As I highlight in the Introduction, the impulse to relocate Scripture within the church was catalyzed by a large-scale dissatisfaction with the modern critical enterprise. The danger here is that the anti-modern impulse motivating the ecclesial turn in hermeneutics becomes confused with an impulse to flee the world more generally. By vilifying this particular realm beyond the church, theological interpreters risk making an exaggerated claim,

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10 Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 9. In the introduction to *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, he claims more generally that “theological interpretation will be non-modern in several respects” (xvi).


12 This is even more clearly the case if we consider “church discipline” a mark of the church, for the very purpose of the practice is to guard the interior purity of the community. The gaze remains inward.
thereby letting a very particular sliver of the world (the modern, secular academy) scare them into a hermeneutical posture whereby they fear the world itself—or at least ignore it. In truth, however, the space characterized by academic secularity does not represent the “world” as a theological category.13 The difference between “church” and “academy” is less a matter of reading practices and methods per se than of the ends towards which they are directed. To read in the academy is therefore not necessarily to read in a non-ecclesial manner. We need not flee the world in order to read theologically. Rather, we must become free from fear and thus free to direct any number of methods towards theological ends. The nature of this freedom will become clear in chapter 8.14

A third possible reason for the lack of missional themes within theological interpretation lies in the movement’s postliberal roots. George Lindbeck’s paradigmatic work, The Nature of Doctrine, utilizes the concepts of culture and language to construct a distinct account of ecclesial space that, inter alia, functions to norm scriptural interpretation. This culturally-normed account of hermeneutics is clearly on display, for example, in Hans Frei’s suggestion that the sensus literalis is

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13 I will continue to unpack this theme below and in chapter 8. The basic tension to note for now is that the church is neither completely of the world nor completely against it. This nuance becomes especially evident in John 17. Jesus claims that his followers are “from the world” (v. 6) and “in the world” (v. 11), and he does not ask the Father “to take them out of the world” (v. 15). Yet at the same time, “they do not belong to the world” (v. 14). For precisely this reason, Jesus can send them “into the world” (v. 18). Thus there is some truth in the old adage that Christians are in the world but not of it. Yet much hinges on the nature of this “of.” No less than the Word made flesh, Jesus’ followers embody the stuff of the world; they are of the world in the sense that they are ontologically worldly. The point of John 17 is that even though Christians are worldly in this important sense, they do not belong to the world. In terms that will become clearer in the following chapter, disciples are called to be in the world without being captive to the powers that determine worldly patterns of existence, thereby remaining free to be for the world. This distinction allows us to avoid the opposite errors of isolationism and assimilation. That which differentiates the church from the world is not the stuff of which it is made (an ontological issue) but the one toward whom this stuff is oriented and, therefore, the unique pattern of life it embodies.

14 While some will rightly argue that methodological naturalism undermines genuine theological interpretation, the claim seems so obvious as to warrant little discussion. The problem in this case has more to do with the religious-metaphysical commitments underlying the method. It seems straightforward enough to claim that atheists will read as atheists and Christians will read as Christians (or at least can). As much as modern academic space can house both readers, one need not fear the space itself. (It is a valid question, of course, whether the academy can in fact house both readers, but this is a separate issue.)
the product of a distinct socio-linguistic culture. The notion of intratextuality that emerges in Lindbeck and Frei suggests a unidirectional movement in which extra-ecclesial reality is absorbed within the all-encompassing culture of the church. Robert Wilken represents the Lindbeckian perspective when he refers to church growth as “translation into the Lord’s style of language, bringing alien language into the orbit of Christian belief and practice and giving it a different meaning.”

As critics have noted, when ecclesial culture becomes hermeneutically normative, the church becomes an insular space that deflects outside influences, thereby foreclosing the possibility that the world beyond the church might challenge or expand its imagination.

**Ecclesiological Deficiencies Underlying Theological Interpretation**

Regardless of whether the tendency arises from (1) locating the act of reading within an ecclesiology that presupposes the conditions of Christendom, (2) retreating from the world out of a fear of methodological secularism, or (3) over-valuing the cultural resources the church brings to the act of reading, a similar underlying disposition is operative. All three imply a vision of the church as a “well-protected area…[that] can have its own style of life, speak its own language, determine its own time. The direct intercourse between the Church and the world has ceased.”

Hermeneutical implications obviously lie close at hand. Such an ecclesiology is implied in Rusty Reno’s suggestion that the culture of the church is hermeneutically normative.

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similarly emphasizes a sharp distinction between church and world when he suggests that ecclesial culture stands in direct competition with “an increasingly alien and hostile” culture outside the church.\textsuperscript{20} Kathryn Tanner diagnoses this tendency. She argues that these and other accounts of the church rely on the presence of a qualitatively distinct and incommensurable culture.\textsuperscript{21} Within culture understood in this way, meaning is self-contained. She continues, “This sort of holistic interpretive stance tends indeed to view influences from other cultures as a source of cultural disruption...[that] need to be either repulsed or neutralized in ways that allow a culture’s overall character to remain unchanged.”\textsuperscript{22}

It makes sense, then, that Wilken laments the loss of “a nurturing Christian culture” and longs for its return, boldly claiming that “nothing is more needful today than the survival of Christian culture.”\textsuperscript{23} As we saw in chapter 3, Jenson exemplifies this stance when he calls for an array of “discipline at the borders”—i.e., culture-constituting practices that norm intra-ecclesial life and thought. As with Jenson, Wilken’s strong valuation of culture relies upon a conflation of Christ and community: “Christ entered history as a community, a society...and the form taken by the community’s life is Christ within society.”\textsuperscript{24} Beyond appearing eerily European, Wilken’s vision of

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\textsuperscript{20} Wilken, “The Church’s Way of Speaking,” 30.

\textsuperscript{21} Kathryn Tanner, “Cultural Theory,” in Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology, 531.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Robert Wilken, “The Church as Culture,” First Things, (April 2004): 32, 36. Wilken defines culture as “the pattern of inherited meanings and sensibilities encoded in rituals, laws, languages, practices, and stories that can order, inspire, and guide the behavior, thoughts, and affections of a people” (32). The anti-missional implications begin to emerge when he suggests that compared to sustaining the culture itself “it is less urgent to convince the alternative culture in which we live of the truth of Christ” (36). This is not necessarily to abandon the world to its own devices (as Bonhoeffer claims was a potential implication of an ecclesial posture that prioritized survival), but it does categorically preclude cultural newness from characterizing the church’s renewal and thereby prohibits the non-Christian world from contributing anything meaningful to this renewal. If there is a conception of mission implied in Wilken’s argument (it is not clear that there is), it is one characterized by cultural diffusion.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 32.
\end{flushleft}
ecclesial culture implies that differing forms of the church threaten to become something other than Jesus’ living presence.

Given this ecclesiology, particular cultural artifacts gain an inflated importance, functioning normatively as relics from a past age that maintain Christian identity in the present.\textsuperscript{25} This is particularly true of the church’s textual relic. If, as Wilken suggests, “culture lives by language” that is “formed and carried by the language of the Scriptures,”\textsuperscript{26} it would seem that any modification of traditional biblical language—say, through translation or vernacularization—should be treated with suspicion, indeed as an affront to Christ’s very presence. Wilken thus writes, “If there is a distinctly Christian language, we must be wary of translation…Jerusalem cannot become Paris or Moscow or New York without losing its rootedness in the biblical narrative.”\textsuperscript{27} To translate these words into another idiom is to risk creating another religion.

This means, in short, that encounter with that which lies beyond the church is rendered hermeneutically superfluous. Whereas Kwame Bediako, as one example, refers to “genuinely and specifically \textit{African} contributions” that resonate “far beyond what the missionary transmission conceived,”\textsuperscript{28} the account of church on display in much theological interpretation seems to preclude such possibilities. The church becomes instead an “enclosed, perhaps idealized space”\textsuperscript{29} standing in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} See Flett, \textit{Apostolicity}, 115.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Wilken, “The Church as Culture,” 35.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid. Also see Wilken, “The Church’s Way of Speaking.” 29. For more on the anti-missional tenor of cultural ecclesiology, see David W. Congdon’s forthcoming article, “The Nature of the Church in Theological Interpretation: Culture, \textit{Volk}, and Mission” (to appear in \textit{Journal of Theological Interpretation}).
\item \textsuperscript{28} Kwame Bediako, \textit{Jesus and the Gospel: History and Experience} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 56, 15. Also see Walls, \textit{Missionary Movement}, 146, where he compares the enriching potential of \textit{African} culture to the role of Greek culture in the early church.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Francis Watson, \textit{Text, Church and World} (London: T&T Clark, 1994), 6.
\end{itemize}
explicit contrast to non-ecclesial cultures. On this view, the church’s metaphorical walls become of utmost importance. Such clear-cut separation allows for—indeed, creates—cultural survival. The obvious implication is that the location of the church within its wider cultural-geographical context remains irrelevant to intra-ecclesial activity. To recall Tanner’s insight, such reality is at best disruptive.

To read in, as, and for the church necessarily entails not reading in, as, and for the world.

Of course, not all theological interpreters will agree with this strongly cultural account of the church. Some proponents of the movement recognize the importance of the church’s relationship with realities that lie beyond it. For example, one of the nine theses in The Art of Reading Scripture claims that the church must read with diverse others outside the church, for these are the ones from whom the church needs to learn. 30 I agree with this proposal. The problem, however, is that ecclesiological commitments often militate against it.

This hermeneutical deficiency correlates with an ecclesiological deficiency. Framed within a culturally competitive account of the church, “mission” ceases to have ecclesiological relevance. The church “is” something, and then (if at all) it is carried outwards. The thick and defensible boundaries necessary to fund ecclesial distinction and house a distinctly ecclesial hermeneutic necessitate that missional engagement with the world is a secondary step that exists as an addendum to the more fundamental task of cultural maintenance. Consequently, mission ceases to be one of the distinct practices that constitute the church’s unique culture as such. 31 When the church does turn its attention outward, it usually aims to expand its founding culture by means of a process that Lamin

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30 The Art of Reading Scripture, 4-5.

31 Flett argues, in conversation with Barth, that this fundamentally static account of the church corresponds with and derives from a classical doctrine of God in which God’s life is defined in and of itself in distinction from God’s gracious movement outward. See The Witness of God, 196-239.
Sanneh critically refers to as social assimilation and diffusion. Mission becomes a matter of repetition and replication, of expanding what is already there and displacing the alternative cultures the church encounters. Bosch points to the obvious imperialistic elements undergirding this account of mission when he claims that the “West has often domesticated the gospel in its own culture while making it unnecessarily foreign to other cultures.” The way of life embodied by the sending church (including a way of reading Scripture) becomes the implied telos of missionary activity.

Apostolicity and Hermeneutics

Culturally competitive accounts of the church often rely upon a conception of “apostolicity” tantamount to cultural continuity. Robert Jenson suggests, for example, that apostolic succession—along with canon and creed—is one of the touchstones that allows the community to police its borders and thereby secures normative ecclesial standards across time. However, another notion of apostolicity is possible, one in which the church’s sentness comes to the fore. John Flett has recently made this argument, suggesting that the traditional notion of apostolicity as cultural continuity fails to deal adequately with the worldwide Christian movement. Rather than viewing the diversity of worldwide Christianity as a regrettable loss of apostolic continuity, what if we saw it as apostolicity’s proper consequence? Cross-cultural movement, then, need not be seen as a process of giving up a


34 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 455.

35 Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 71-76.
normative apostolic culture; we can appreciate such movement as a living expression of the church’s apostolicity. As Flett writes, “Cross-cultural transmission and local appropriation are necessary to a theological definition of apostolicity.”

Apostolicity, on this account, has more to do with the church’s relationship with the risen Lord than with a normative culture. As the Apostle Paul suggests, his own apostolicity came not “from human authorities” and is “not of human origin” (Gal. 1:1, 11) but derives solely from Christ’s call. His institutional authority is derivative of his apostolicity, not its ground. On this reading, apostolicity has unique material significance grounded in Christ himself. As the one who was himself sent, Jesus sends his apostles to continue his mission. An apostolic church, therefore, is inherently missional. Missionary movement is a feature of its very identity.

That the church is inherently apostolic and inherently missional carries implications for how we construe its cultural life. We can now agree with Bediako when he claims that “the gospel has no permanent resident culture.” In addition, this account of ecclesial space avoids cultural imperialism; as Visser ‘t Hooft notes, “the whole church must recognize that her divine mission calls for the most dynamic and costly flexibility.” Such a church must not be “afraid to leave behind the securities of its conventional structures” but must be “glad to dwell in the tent of perpetual adaptation.” Lamin Sanneh famously refers to this in terms of a vernacular translation movement. Bediako notes, for example, that vernacularization gave Africans the freedom to make their own categories of

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36 Flett, Apostolicity, 184.


meaning. This hermeneutical liberation, he claims, allowed for the emergence of Christian Africa, which he calls the surprise story of the modern missionary movement. Walls suggests that while some may see this as a divergence from essential Christianity, uniquely African developments stands as a necessary consequence of the incarnation, for the incarnation itself is an act of translation. “The first divine act of translation thus gives rise to a constant succession of new translations. Christian diversity is the necessary product of the incarnation.”\(^40\) On this reading, interpretation is inherent to the gospel itself.\(^41\)

Taking seriously the movement of Christianity into non-Western contexts, missiologists have learned to appreciate what the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) has implied all along—(a) that Scripture is absolutely central and indispensable to the church’s life and thought and also (b) that there are no culturally determined readings. In stark contrast to Wilken’s notion that translation risks creating a different religion, Walls suggests that a different decision at the Jerusalem Council regarding the nature of cultural normativity would have led to a different faith.\(^42\)

We have good reason, then, to reject a one-directional hermeneutical model of absorption and instead affirm a two-directional process though which both culture and our understanding of Scripture are expanded.\(^43\) As Robert Schreiter convincingly argues in his work, *The New Catholicity,*

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\(^{39}\) Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 204-205.


\(^{43}\) Of course, this is not to say that African culture and Scripture are totally continuous (just as they are not utterly discontinuous). Post-independence and post-missionary Africa evidences a creative display of theological engagement with culture and its hermeneutical implications. On the varieties of African appropriation of the gospel, see Kwame Bediako, “African Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians,* ed. David F. Ford (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 426-444.
“Information is both lost and gained when crossing a cultural boundary.”  

He goes on to suggest that in “too much reflection on intercultural dynamics of Christian evangelization, there is an overemphasis on whether ‘they’ (the hearers) are going to get the Christian message right…There is not enough emphasis on the transformation of the speaker.”  

Walls likewise reminds us, “It is a delightful paradox that the more Christ is translated into the various thought forms and life systems which form our various national identities, the richer all of us will be in our common Christian identity.”

Drawing from these arguments, I am claiming, in short, that the normative ecclesiology commonly presupposed within recent conversations about theological interpretation must confront the obvious pluriformity and polycentricity of world Christianity. The account of the gospel and hermeneutics on display in Bediako, Sanneh, Schreiter, Walls, and others presupposes more cultural malleability than many theological interpreters allow. The problem is twofold: that the church presupposed within the recent ecclesial turn in hermeneutics is missionally deficient and, consequently, that the actual missionary activity of the church is hermeneutically inconsequential. Given the non-Western experience of the gospel’s cross-cultural movement, we conclude that the church is not hermeneutically significant in terms its normative culture; rather, its hermeneutical significance lies in its correspondence to the risen Christ. Called by Christ, the church’s existence is

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and *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999).


45 Ibid., 43.

essentially missional and its missionary movement shapes and sustains the hermeneutical process itself.

The question now becomes: what sort of ecclesiology can accommodate this realization? Can we articulate an account of the church that allows for cultural diversity and yet does not abandon Christian distinctiveness and faithfulness?

I will shortly turn to Bonhoeffer to help with this ecclesiological task. It should come as no surprise that the discipleship motif continues to guide my constructive argument. In fact, the notions of *journeying* and *following*—inherent to the discipleship motif—conform well with the discovery of worldwide Christianity. According to John Mbiti, one of the forebears of African theology, “We can add nothing to the Gospel…Christianity is always a beggar seeking food and drink, cover and shelter from the cultures it encounters in its never-ending journeys and wanderings.” Likewise, Sanneh prioritizes the out-ahead-ness of Christ by suggesting that “the God whom the missionary came to serve…actually preceded him or her in the field.” In order to discover God’s true identity, he continues, the missionary must step beyond his cultural confines and “delve deep into the local culture.”

The remainder of this chapter proceeds under the conviction that rethinking the nature of the church—a task that world Christianity, post-Christendom, and mission itself require of us—subsequently forces us to rethink the nature of interpretive faithfulness *within* the church. While some may think that pursuing a genuinely missional hermeneutic would do precisely what this project seeks not to do, namely, take Scripture out of the church, such a view relies on a faulty

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notion of what the church is. The problem, I suggest, is not the claim that Scripture is the book of the church; the problem, more fundamentally, has to do with the nature of the church that reads the book.

**The Recent Turn Toward Missional Hermeneutics**

This situation within discussions of theological hermeneutics finds an opposite trend reflected within discussions of missional hermeneutics. As theological interpretation has not fully made a missional turn, missional hermeneutics has not fully embraced the church as a hermeneutical space. In order to unpack this claim, I must first analyze how the turn toward mission in hermeneutics has taken shape in recent theology.

The recent missional turn in hermeneutics has tended to take one of the three following forms: a claim about the content of the canon itself, a claim about the nature of the God to whom the canon witnesses, or a claim about the nature of Scripture itself as a gift from God. All of these carry important practical implications that we do well to consider. Yet, I suggest that more can and should be said. The missional turn in hermeneutics must also make a distinctly *ecclesiological* assertion. As I argue below, I believe Bonhoeffer can help in this task.

The recent turn toward mission in hermeneutics is perhaps most straightforwardly evident in those scholars who foreground the important role mission plays within the overarching biblical narrative. Rather than being limited to a few explicit sending verses, mission lies at the heart of the canon. 49 Christopher Wright and Michael Goheen argue, for example, that the Bible tells one

49 George R. Hunsberger refers to this as the “missional direction of the story;” see Hunsberger, “Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping a Conversation,” *Missiology* 39, no. 3 (2011): 310-311.
unfolding story of God’s mission of redemption, that mission is a “central strand” within the canon, and that the interpreter must grasp the overarching missional direction of the canon in order to faithfully exegete a particular text within it. In *Bible and Mission*, Richard Bauckham likewise expounds the “missionary direction” of the Bible, claiming that the overarching movement from particular (i.e., Abraham) to universal (i.e., the eschatological kingdom) is a feature of the canon itself. Though N. T. Wright has only recently given direct attention to the theme of mission, similar overarching exegetical insights pulse through his work. In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, for example, he suggests that the overarching pattern of God’s redemption, specifically in the form of exile and return, serves as the hermeneutical grid through which to filter and interpret the various components of the biblical witness. In these and other biblical scholars, a wide-angle missional claim exerts particular hermeneutical force. The church must read missionally because the text itself demands it.


51 Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bakers, 2003), 11. Of course, it could be readily objected that the theme of mission rarely shows up in the OT. Bauckham suggests, however, that various “thematic trajectories” within the OT are necessary for understanding mission in the NT writings (47). On the danger of oppressive “metanarratives” within biblical interpretation, see 83-112 and Richard Bauckham, “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, 38-53.

52 See N. T. Wright’s inaugural lecture at St. Andrews, published as “Imagining the Kingdom: Mission and Theology in Early Christianity,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 4 (2012): 379-401. Wright concludes this lecture by suggesting that the church’s missionary task of imagining the kingdom “will simultaneously advance the academic understanding of our extraordinary primary texts” (401)—he suggests, in other words, that mission carries hermeneutical significance.


54 Importantly, these scholars attempt to argue for the hermeneutical value of mission on the basis of sound exegetical principles. Rather than an eisegetical invention, the interrelatedness of mission and hermeneutics is predicated upon claims to scholarly seriousness and historical rigor.
Bauckham infuses a distinctly theological dimension into missional hermeneutics by suggesting that “the direction of the biblical story corresponds to the biblical God.” In other words, he argues that the exegetical claim about the content of the canon dovetails with a theological claim about the doctrine of God. This theological commitment is paradigmatically on display in David Bosch’s esteemed work, Transforming Mission. According to Bosch, mission is about what God does before it is about what the church does, an attribute of God before an activity of the community. Mission is always God’s. Darrell Guder likewise suggests that the main “paradigm shift in twentieth century missiology has been away from the ecclesio-centric understanding of mission shaped by Christendom to the theo-centric and ultimately Trinitarian understanding of mission.” Moltmann similarly writes, “It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church.” The church must read Scripture missionally, in short, because the text’s subject-matter is an essentially missional being.

This theological claim about the nature of God paves the way for a unique bibliological claim: Scripture itself is both the product of God’s mission and a participant within it, a divine gift that shapes the church to fit within God’s ongoing work. N. T. Wright argues, for example, that the scriptural texts “were not simply about the coming of God’s Kingdom into all the world; they were,

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55 Bauckham, Bible and Mission, 12.
56 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 389.
and were designed to be, part of the *means whereby that happened.*\(^59\) The Bible is a missional text by virtue of what it *does.*\(^60\) Darrell Guder expands on this: “The actual task of these scriptures, then, was to deal with the problems and conflicts, the challenges and doubts as they emerged in particular contexts, so that these communities could be faithful to their calling.” Scripture carries the same missional function today: “The basic hermeneutical question that we are constantly asking the biblical text might be formulated in this way: How did this particular text continue the formation of witnessing communities then, and how does it do that today?”\(^61\) The church must read Scripture missionally because in both its divine and human dimensions, such was the purpose of the canon in the first place.

Whether focusing on the content of the canonical story, the nature of divine being and action, or the nature of Scripture itself, these recent trends are to be commended for putting mission back on the map of hermeneutical conversations. It is to be noted, however, that none of these trends necessarily requires locating the act of reading in distinctly ecclesial space or in the act of mission itself. For sure, ecclesiology has been at the center of broader debates in missional theology. The theocentric turn in twentieth century missiology has concomitantly called for a renewed and properly ordered emphasis on the church as the primary means by which God carries out the *missio*


\(^60\) Also see Guder, “Missional Hermeneutics,” 113, 119.

\(^61\) Ibid., 108, 119. Also see Darrell Guder, “Biblical Formation and Discipleship,” in *Treasure in Jars of Clay: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, ed. Lois Y. Barrett (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), in which he suggests that Jesus formed his first disciples for mission so that their testimony (both spoken and written) could become the means of the church’s future formation for mission (62).
Yet, the ecclesiological claim and the hermeneutical claim continue to exist at a distance from each other.\textsuperscript{63}

The problem, in short, is that any of the three recent trends in missional hermeneutics can be easily re-inscribed within the flawed ecclesiology that undergirds much theological interpretation. Thus the same shortcoming presents itself: the church can read Scripture so as to fund or sanction mission, but it remains unclear how the church can read Scripture \textit{in} mission, precisely as a community that exists in and for the world. Hermeneutical faithfulness and missional movement remain, at best, sequentially ordered events. Without further clarification it remains possible, given these trends in missional theology, that one could enact hermeneutical faithfulness \textit{without actually participating in God’s mission}. The key practices that fund a missional hermeneutic would remain entirely insular. With this, the temptation to build thick cultural walls around the church presents itself again, even if “mission” is now a prominent theme within the language and custom of the normative ecclesial culture.

\textsuperscript{62} Guder, “Missional Hermeneutics,” 125.

\textsuperscript{63} Biblical scholar Michael Barram hints at a way forward when he emphasizes the \textit{missional location} of biblical study in, “The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic,” \textit{Interpretation} 61, no. 1 (2007): 42-58. “Ultimately,” he claims, “I am persuaded that faithful interpretation in our day will require a missional hermeneutic—that is, an approach to biblical texts that privileges the missiological ‘location’ of the Christian community in the world as a hermeneutical key” (42-3). Barram is motivated primarily by methodological issues. He worries that missional interpreters appear uncritical, overly conservative, and eisegetical in the eyes of the critical guild. He argues that missional theologians must therefore demonstrate that mission exerts robust exegetical significance, and thus that one can articulate the missional nature of Scripture within the methodological assumptions of the guild. There is much to commend this task. By focusing on issues of method, however, we face the risk of again making mission merely an idea about the text rather than a claim about the nature and activity of the community that reads it. Without this latter dimension, mission becomes hermeneutically significant in terms of \textit{what} we read, in terms of the content we abstract from the text (whether critically or naively), but not \textit{of how} we read. In this, the recent turn toward mission in hermeneutics risks remaining ideational. The danger in this is that mission becomes hermeneutically significant merely in terms of what Barram calls a “rubric for biblical interpretation” (50) or an “interpretive key” (57). Mission becomes one idea among others vying for hermeneutical significance.
In what follows in this chapter I offer a different account of the church as a missional space. The church reads in a certain way on the basis of what it knows—e.g., that mission is central to God’s character, the church’s task, and the biblical narrative. But mission is also hermeneutically central, I hope to show, by virtue of what the church does—i.e., actively participate in Christ’s ongoing mission of reconciliation. The first disciples learn to see and know differently not simply when Jesus tells them to go on mission but when, led by the Spirit, they actually encounter others along the way. The paradigmatic instance of this, of course, is the gospel’s movement to the gentiles; it is not the call to mission but the actual movement that ensues that gives the church eyes to read her story—indeed, to know her gospel—in new ways. Mission itself is hermeneutically transformative. I am searching, in other words, for an account of the church’s social location that is in fact a “location” in more than a thinly metaphorical sense. The recent trend to reassert the hermeneutical significance of mission has left underdeveloped the sense in which mission itself—not just an idea about it—is ingredient for the church’s hermeneutical task.

**Bonhoeffer’s Missional Ecclesiology**

The first step toward righting this trend is to articulate an account of the church that can serve as the missional location for reading. My primary goal in this section, in other words, is to sketch a missional ecclesiology that overcomes the deficiencies within both the ecclesial and missional postures and that can therefore house a genuinely missional hermeneutic.

Given that mission never became a formal object of focus in his work, that he seems never to have engaged missiological literature, and that the term “mission” plays a very minor role in his...
theological lexicon, Bonhoeffer might initially seem like a strange resource for this task. Not only is it true that he follows the standard theology of his day in omitting mission as a theological locus, some of his early writings seem downright anti-missional in nature.

This anti-missional posture owes, at least in part, to Bonhoeffer’s socio-political context. As we will see more fully below, when his theological imagination remains ensconced within a form of Christendom undergirded by Lutheranism’s traditional two-kingsdoms doctrine, nationalism trumps mission. This is unsurprising, for when the church enjoys an established and secure existence vis-à-vis the state, its task becomes primarily spiritual and interior. While this does not eliminate the church’s public function, it does give its publicity a very particular shape. On the one hand, the church functions as a “check” on the state, thereby serving to buttress the status quo. On the other hand, the church may, if it so chooses, send missionaries into foreign lands. Yet, in being so entangled within the more primary task of securing and stabilizing the sending culture, the missionary task is not easily differentiated from the state’s political agenda. If being a good Christian is inseparable from being a patriotic German, it is no wonder that mission devolves into Germanization, as some have claimed. It makes sense, for example, that many German theologians positively correlated the nation’s political involvement in WWI with the church’s fulfilment of the

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64 In this way, he remains a child of his German Lutheran context; see Richard Bliese, “Bonhoeffer and the Great Commission: Does Bonhoeffer Have a Theology of Mission?” in Reflections on Bonhoeffer, 253-266. The IMC sponsored the Jerusalem Conference (1928) and the Tambaran Conference (1938), but we find no evidence that Bonhoeffer was conversant with these conferences. During his Finkenwalde period, he is cordial to the idea of “missionaries” evangelizing in spiritually dead regions (see DBWE 14, 214). He does use the word Volksmission, but it usually functions narrowly, similarly to the way “evangelism” functions today (see DBWE 14, 519).

65 Luther writes, for example, “No one has any longer such a universal apostolic command, but each bishop or pastor has his appointed diocese or parish” (quoted in Bliese, “Bonhoeffer and the Great Commission,” 254).

66 See Williams’ analysis of the young Bonhoeffer in Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus, 12.
Great Commission—to pursue one was necessarily to pursue the other. Guder further suggests that wedding the church to a political arrangement “leads to a geographical and cultural redefinition of the church, and in the process, the calling to missional witness disappears. In its place, birth location, geography, and the processes of socialization become the way that the church reproduces itself.” Wilbert Shenk famously suggests that this process actually removes mission from the sphere of the church: “The Christendom model of church may be characterized as church without mission.”

Bonhoeffer’s Christendom-shaped imagination becomes especially clear in a series of lectures he delivered in Barcelona in 1928-29. Reggie Williams has recently argued that these lectures reveal the underlying nationalistic impulse animating his early theology. Williams contends that Bonhoeffer, at this point, blends Jesus with German nationalism and upholds patriotism as an element of Christian faithfulness. In a telling passage, Bonhoeffer states

Peoples [Völker] are like individuals. At first they are immature and need guidance. Then they…mature into adults, and they die. This situation is neither good nor bad in and of itself, yet profound questions are concealed here. For growth involves expansion; an increase in

67 As David W. Congdon has recently argued, many German theologians supported WWI “on the grounds that they would be supporting the work of the Great Commission” (“Dialectical Theology as Theology of Mission: Investigating the Origins of Karl Barth’s Break with Liberalism,” International Journal of Systematic Theology 16, no. 4 (2014): 390). Along with the more famous “Appeal of the 93 to the Cultural World” (which many scholars cite as a key moment in Barth’s conversion from liberalism), the “Appeal of German Churchmen and Professors to Protestant Christians in Foreign Lands” was a specifically ecclesiastical statement signed on 4 September, 1914. “What is remarkable about this manifesto,” Congdon writes, “is the way it justifies German military aggression on specifically missionary—in truth, pseudomissionary—grounds” (400). Congdon argues that for the authors of this manifesto, war was a distinctly missionary matter. He claims, quoting from the 1914 manifesto: “for these church leaders and theologians, mission has to do with ‘the task of colonization in the primitive world,’ in which Germany has ‘gained a modest share’ by ‘develop[ing] the gifts that God had given it’” (401). The ultimate goal of mission, a goal which was bolstered by the war efforts, was the “conversion of a non-Christian nation into a Christian nation” (401).


69 Wilbert Shenk, Write the Vision: The Church Renewed (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 35, emphasis original. A hermeneutical point lies close at hand. According to Bliese, German mission theology was a “one-way street.” While mainstream German systematic theology affected the missiology of the day (when and where it emerged), “mission theology throughout the world did not significantly influence German systematic theology” (“Bonhoeffer and the Great Commission,” 255).

70 Williams, Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus, 11.
strength involves pushing aside other individuals. In that respect the life of an individual person is no different than that of a people. Every people [Volk], however, has within itself a call from God to create its history, to enter into the struggle that is the life of the nations. \(^{71}\) … God calls a people to diversity, to struggle, to victory. Strength also comes from God, and power and victory, for God creates youth in the individual as well as in nations, and God loves youth, for God himself is eternally young and strong and victorious. And fear and weakness will be conquered by courage and strength. Now, should a people experiencing God’s call in its own life…should not such a people be allowed to follow that call, even if it disregards the lives of other people? God is the Lord of history. \(^{72}\)

Much can be gleaned from this dense passage. In particular, note that Bonhoeffer lays the theoretical groundwork for upholding the superiority of the German people and in so doing offers ideological justification for German colonial expansion. If in God’s providence the German people are to mature, then surely the nation, precisely as a matter of its Christian faithfulness, must disregard and push aside other peoples.

\textit{The Kirchenkampf and Bonhoeffer’s Developing Ecclesiology}

The nationalistic tones in Bonhoeffer’s early theology begin to fade as the \textit{Kirchenkampf} intensifies and as his trust in the established church-state relationship begins to wane. Given the blatant faithlessness of the state, the church can no longer serve as the spiritual guarantor of society. Consequently, Bonhoeffer begins to imagine a task of the church in distinct opposition to the state—poignantly evident, for example, in his famous suggestion that the church is “not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself.” \(^{73}\)

\(^{71}\) Here Clifford Green notes that Germans viewed the peace treaty of Versailles as an attempt to “push aside” the German people. In picking up this theme, Bonhoeffer “adopts categories widespread especially among Germans living in foreign countries” (DBWE 10, 373 no. 34).

\(^{72}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 10, 373. The idea of “pushing aside” others implies the notion of \textit{Lebensraum}, which was key in ideologically justifying Nazi military advances (see Williams, \textit{Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus}, 145).

\(^{73}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 12, 365; commonly translated: “to fall within the spokes of the wheel.”
Bonhoeffer’s burgeoning missional imagination continues to develop throughout his time at Finkenwalde. This is especially apparent in *Discipleship*, his main work emerging from that period. In contrast to other religious teachers, Jesus does not simply impart doctrine or ideas; he shares his task and his very power.\(^{74}\) In following Jesus, “The disciples are focused not only on heaven, but are reminded of their mission on earth.”\(^{75}\) Jesus calls the disciples precisely because he “is looking for help.”\(^{76}\) Bonhoeffer even goes so far as to suggest that Christ cannot do this work alone and that in participating in Christ’s power, the first disciples are in fact “doing the work of Christ.”\(^{77}\) “The message and the effectiveness of the messengers are exactly the same as Jesus Christ’s own message and work. They participate in his power.”\(^{78}\) Jesus Christ himself goes through the world in and as his messengers and through them does his own work.\(^{79}\)

Two features of Bonhoeffer’s missional theology become evident. First, he affirms that the *creatura verbi* is a missional space; it is precisely Christ’s call that shapes and empowers a missional community. Second, for Bonhoeffer the logic of discipleship carries within it the logic of mission, for it is the very movement of Christ that calls forth missional movement: “Jesus goes ahead of [the disciples] to other people, and the disciples follow him…Disciples can encounter other people only as those to whom Jesus himself comes.”\(^{80}\) This insight helps explain Bonhoeffer’s openness to

\(^{74}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 186.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 111; also see 173.

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 185-6.

\(^{77}\) Ibid.

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 188.

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 189.

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 170.
encountering the “other” beyond the walls of the church. Concerning his planned trip to India in 1934, for example, he wonders if “perhaps one can learn something very important” there, for it appears “as if perhaps more Christianity is found in that ‘heathendom’ than in our entire German Church.”

According to Bonhoeffer, those called by Christ are to proclaim a simple message: the coming reign of God on earth. In so doing they are not driven by an agenda, by fanaticism, or by power, for this would be to confuse “the word of the gospel with a conquering idea.” An idea, Bonhoeffer says, knows no resistance. “The idea is strong. But the Word of God is so weak that it suffers to be despised and rejected by people.” In contrast to his Barcelona lectures, in which he advocated for expansion, overcoming resistance, and pushing aside others, Bonhoeffer now believes that “the Word accepts the resistance it encounters and bears it.” He likewise argues that “nothing is impossible for the idea, but for the gospel there are impossibilities. The Word is weaker than the idea. Likewise, the witnesses of the Word are weaker than the propagandists of an idea.” In contrast to the nationalistic fervor pulsing underneath Bonhoeffer’s earlier theology, he now contends that Jesus’ witnesses are moved to encounter others not because they are fanatically motivated by an idea, not because of an agenda, not because of some enthusiasm for a cause, but only because they have been called to follow Jesus.

The Temptation of Seclusion

81 See Bonhoeffer, DBWE 13, 145-146 and Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 407-409.
82 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 190.
83 Ibid., 173.
84 Ibid.
While a careful reading of Discipleship reveals an operative theology of mission, it was not clear to everyone that Bonhoeffer’s vision of the church could accomplish what he desired. It seemed to some outsiders that Finkenwalde represented a pious retreat into a spiritual ghetto. After all, Bonhoeffer himself refers to it as a “new kind of monasticism.” He even speaks of a church sealed off from the world: “Just as Noah’s ark had to be covered ‘inside and out with pitch’…so does the journey of the sealed church-community resemble the passage of the ark through the floodwaters.”\(^85\) The most famous critical voice belonged to none other than Karl Barth. Wilhelm Rott, Bonhoeffer’s assistant at Finkenwalde, visited Basel in 1935, and from Barth’s calendar notes we learn of his concern that Bonhoeffer’s monastic tendencies represented an attempt “to flee the world.”\(^86\)

In fairness to Barth, Bonhoeffer is not always clear at this point in his theological development. He can simultaneously speak of the church in strongly sectarian terms (a community against the world) and in missional terms (a community in and for the world). Yet Bonhoeffer displays impulses that suggest a way beyond this seeming tension. At Finkenwalde, he is learning to integrate “distinction from” and “existence for” into one coherent ecclesiological vision. He claims, for example, that “the otherworldliness of the church takes place in the midst of the world.”\(^87\) As he writes in a letter, “The goal is not monastic isolation but rather the most intensive concentration for the sake

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\(^85\) Ibid., 260.

\(^86\) Bonhoeffer, Ibid., 266 no. 3. The fact that Bonhoeffer had spent eighteen months in London during the initial phases of the church struggle likely contributed to Barth’s worry that he was fleeing responsibility.

\(^87\) Ibid., 245.
of ministry to the world.”88 For Bonhoeffer, the church’s witness must become public, for “the gospel should not become some sectarian affair.”89 Hence Bethge writes,

It would be a mistake to interpret this as Bonhoeffer’s attempt to escape from the world. The ghetto of Discipleship is not the peaceful backwater of the pietists, nor is it the otherworldliness of the visionaries, neither of whom are particularly loyal to the world. Discipleship is a call to battle, it is concentration and hence restriction, so that the entire earth may be reconquered by the infinite message.90

From prison Bonhoeffer retrospectively detects an impulse toward withdrawal in his Finkenwalde theology, yet he continues to stand by his earlier writings, affirming the basic impulse evident therein even though the theological rationale for it was not fully developed.91 I believe, in other words, that during his Finkenwalde period Bonhoeffer desires to integrate “distinction from” and “existence for” into one ecclesiological vision, but lacks the theological resources to do so in a coherent and compelling way. He remains hamstrung by his theological inheritance.

This tendency is, at least in part, attributable to the context of his Finkenwalde deliberations. An ecclesiology that assumes the social conditions of Christendom (as Bonhoeffer’s early theology undoubtedly did) is often tempted to resort to sectarianism when those conditions crumble. During a process of de-Christianization, the community’s distinct visibility takes on new significance as the community seeks fervently to cling to its identity. From prison, Bonhoeffer detects this tendency within the Confessing Church; motivated by the “hyperactivity of panic,”92 the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer believes, made survival the main component of its mission. Said differently, if the

88 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 14, 96.
89 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 196.
90 Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 459.
91 See, e.g., Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 486.
church’s survival is contingent upon the state—as was the case in the post-Reformation
development of two realms theology in which regional rulers defended the church—the church
must seek survival elsewhere when this political arrangement falters. As is evident in the posture of
the Confessing Church, one way to achieve this survival is through a unique focus on the church’s
customs, doctrines, and practices—in short, through discipline at its borders. This seemed to be
Bonhoeffer’s initial inclination. If the church no longer held a settled place in the world afforded by
a particular political arrangement, it was forced to go underground, to stand against the world, and
to stress ecclesial distinctiveness. In this sense, Bonhoeffer’s “sealed ark” ecclesiology is actually a
function of two realms thinking gone bad. The lingering problem in his thinking at this point is not
only the ecclesiology per se but the larger theoretical framework within which the church is situated.
Limited to the imaginative resources implicit within a two realms structure, Bonhoeffer cannot help
but offer a missional theology that appears simultaneously sectarian.

Bonhoeffer’s Missional Breakthrough in Ethics

Bonhoeffer’s major imaginative breakthrough occurs in his Ethics manuscripts. Here he most
fully articulates a vision in which Christology, not a particular account of the church-world
relationship, is ecclesiologically basic. In this work, in other words, he develops an account of the
church grounded in Christ, not a political arrangement or a theory of the world. In so doing, he
shows himself to be one of the first genuinely post-Christendom thinkers. As such, he learns to
diagnose and critique two realms theology. Such a theology, he says, places Christ and the world in a
competitive relationship—the two are always “bumping against and repelling each other.” On this

93 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 57.
misguided reading, the church that endeavors to follow Christ has no choice but to compete with the world. Encounter between the two can only happen in the midst of contest.

But Bonhoeffer realizes in *Ethics* that the person and work of Christ undermines the very logic that incites contest. When defined by its relationship to Christ and grounded in him, the church is not at the whims of the world and need not define itself on the basis of a political arrangement. The church must simply look to the Risen One. When it does, it sees that God has reconciled the world in him. Echoing Paul’s cosmic Christology, Bonhoeffer learns to claim that all of reality has been reconciled to God in Christ and is most properly located in him.  

Reconciliation, he comes to see, is an ontologically determinative fact. To participate in Christ is not to participate in a segment of life but in all of it. It follows that “the world” as such no longer exists; such a concept is, at best, a “delusionary abstraction.” Instead of resorting to abstraction, Bonhoeffer defines “the world” as that which has been reconciled to God in Christ and is determined in him.

Within this vision, the link between God and the world is Jesus Christ. In *Ethics*, therefore, Bonhoeffer’s Jesus is not merely the God who took on flesh (*Inkarnation*) but the God who became human (*Menschwerdung*). This terminological distinction allows him unequivocally to argue that in the God-become-human we encounter all humanity, and in all humanity we encounter the God-become-human. To be drawn to Christ is to be at the center of human reality. Whereas much missional theology implies an ecclesiocentric account of mission in which the church mediates Christ to the world, Bonhoeffer makes it possible to claim the opposite, that Christ mediates the church to the world. This points toward a genuinely missional ecclesiology. Bonhoeffer can now

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94 See, e.g., 2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 1:10, Col. 1:20.

claim, “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.” “What matters,” he continues, “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.”

This Christological re-measurement leads to a different account of the church-world distinction than is evident in his Finkenwalde writings. Whereas his earlier theology relied upon, even if only implicitly, an account of community-constituting practices that would seal the church off from the world, he now writes, “The church-community is separated from the world only by this: it believes in the reality of being accepted by God—a reality that belongs to the whole world.” By grounding all reality in Christ, Bonhoeffer makes it impossible to imagine an ontological distinction separating ecclesial and non-ecclesial realms.

Yet the absence of such distinction does not erode the church’s uniqueness. Bonhoeffer can still distinguish the church from the world, but with a Christological view of reality, he does not need to ontologize this distinction. “Church” and “world” are not two substances vying for space. The relevant difference between the two is a matter of Christ becoming real here and now. Any distinction, in other words, is between that which reflects the reality of reconciliation and that which does not—a line that runs through the church and the world alike and that the community must constantly navigate anew. Faithfulness, wherever it occurs, is a matter of “participating in God’s

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96 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 55.

97 Ibid., 67-8.

98 Ibid., 49.
Bonhoeffer consequently reimagines ecclesiology: the church “is nothing but that piece of humanity where Christ has really taken form.”

This shapes the church’s mission, the goal of which “is not…that the condition of the world be improved by my efforts, but that the reality of God show itself everywhere to be the ultimate reality.” He continues, “No one has the responsibility of turning the world into the kingdom of God, but only of taking the next necessary step that corresponds to God’s becoming human in Christ.” By refusing to ontologize the distinction between church and world, Bonhoeffer avoids the twin errors of either rejecting the world or attempting to transform it by building the kingdom on earth. Both mistakes rely upon a misunderstanding of the nature of reality, and both, Bonhoeffer suggests, relegate Christ to “a partial, provincial affair within the whole of reality.” When the church mistakenly sees itself as the link between God and the world, it at once develops an inflated sense of self-concern while also taking on a burden beyond its capacity. But when Jesus himself is the link between God and the world, missionary agency ultimately belongs to God. As Bonhoeffer claims, “Only where it is God who appears on the scene as an acting subject…can we speak about good in history.”

It is thus evident that Bonhoeffer’s Christological re-measurement of the world coincides with a participatory account of missionary agency. “Christian life,” he writes, “is participation in

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99 Ibid., 50.
100 Ibid., 97.
101 Ibid., 48.
102 Ibid., 224-5. Bonhoeffer famously speaks of this missional freedom in terms of “vicarious representative action” (Stellvertretung).
103 Ibid., 57.
104 Ibid., 226.
Christ’s encounter with the world.”\textsuperscript{105} This participatory account of mission becomes even clearer in prison: “Our relationship to God is a new life in ‘being there for others,’ through participation in the being of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{106} When Bonhoeffer argues that “the church is church only when it is there for others,”\textsuperscript{107} he is not reasoning in terms of some sort of works-based righteousness; rather, he is indicating that the church exists precisely as it participates in Christ’s history. This further indicates that for the church there can be no distinction between faithful existence and participatory movement. Christ himself has overcome any supposed centripetal-centrifugal dichotomy. “Go to the nations” and “come follow me” do not take place at a distance from each other, for precisely in coming to Jesus one walks in, with, and toward the world. Thus the church is not a safe and stable entity at the periphery of the world that subsequently, as a secondary step, moves to its center. For Bonhoeffer, the church lives at the center or it does not live at all.

For this reason, I contend that Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion from prison is, at its heart, a missional critique. Religion, as he defines it, consists of the centripetal without the centrifugal. Within the rubric of “religion,” mission is tantamount to preservation, to fighting for a settled location in society, and to competing with the world for cultural space. The end result of this misguided missionary posture, Bonhoeffer imagines, would be a ghettoized church, a church at the margins. This is why he claims that a church that fights for self-preservation has “become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world.”\textsuperscript{108} It is also why the Confessing Church’s obsession with “reiterated confession and ceaseless activity” was

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 159.
\textsuperscript{106} Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 501.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 503.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 389.
fundamentally anti-missional. The seemingly noble attempt to compete for God’s ongoing relevance actually sequesters the church and thereby undermines its missional essence.

Conclusion

As a means of resisting a call to the military, Bonhoeffer left Germany for the United States on June 2, 1939. This trip would prove short-lived. Less than two weeks later he would write, “The full force of self-reproach about a wrong decision comes back up and is almost suffocating.”

“I have made a mistake in coming to America,” Bonhoeffer says. “I must live through this difficult period…with the Christian people of Germany.” Shortly thereafter he boarded a ship back to Germany. His arrival coincided with a growing sense of uncertainty about his role in the church and in the resistance. According to Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, this return marks a new phase in Bonhoeffer’s life and thought. He becomes, Schlingensiepen claims, “a man for his times”:

Nothing marks the change in Bonhoeffer’s thinking better than the fact that, from the autumn of 1939 onward, the concepts of ‘earth’ and ‘reality’ are found more and more at the centre of his thoughts, and the ‘world’ in its negative meaning as evil world, at enmity with God, fades out and the ‘world that God loves’ comes to the fore.

I have argued in this chapter that the Christological re-measurement of reality that emerges in Bonhoeffer’s Ethics manuscripts provides the theological rationale to substantiate this change in sensibility. My point in charting the nuances of Bonhoeffer’s theological development is to show

109 Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 409.
110 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 15, 222.
111 Ibid., 210.
113 Ibid., 295.
how this change coincides with the emergence of a genuinely missional ecclesiology that was nascent within his earlier work but that there lacked the theological framework necessary for its coherence. In prison, Bonhoeffer begins articulating an account of the Christian faith that is radically for the world. Whereas a church that fights for its self-preservation is tempted to compete with the world and leave the world to its own devices, Bonhoeffer imaginatively searches for a form of Christian life and language that is “liberating and redeeming like Jesus’ language.”\(^{114}\) This form of missional life arises as one encounters Jesus and lets oneself “be pulled into walking the path that Jesus walks,”\(^{115}\) thereby participating in his own promeity. This, for Bonhoeffer, defines the essence of the church—“The church is church only when it is there for others.”\(^{116}\)

From prison Bonhoeffer gestures toward the hermeneutical implications that would follow from this missional form of Christian existence. In particular, he sketches an “Outline for a Book” in which he plans to articulate a non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts. Whereas “religion,” as Bonhoeffer understands it, obstructs an encounter with the risen Lord (and thus with the world), a non-religious account of Christianity would do just the opposite. As we saw in chapter 4 when analyzing the “arcane discipline,” the point of Christian life and thought in a world come of age is not to secure God’s presence but to embody a posture whereby this presence can be discovered ever anew. What might it mean to read Scripture from such a posture? Bonhoeffer, of course, never wrote this book, and we are therefore left wondering how precisely he would articulate an account

\(^{114}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 390.

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 480, 490.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 503.
of reading Scripture within a community that has overcome the lingering two realms thinking of his earlier years. In chapter 8 I undertake this imaginative task.
Chapter 8: A Hermeneutic in Mission

The Space of the Church in Mission

In chapter 7 I argued that we should read Bonhoeffer, especially in his mature work, as a missional theologian. In particular, I suggested that by reframing all of reality in relation to Christ, he articulates a missional ecclesiology—a church that transcends competitive patterns of existence in order to exist always in and for the world. In this chapter I examine how this account of the church functions as a space for reading. But before I do that, I must first ask the more fundamental question: what does it imply about the church as a space in the first place? Bonhoeffer tackles this question head on:

The church of Jesus Christ is the place—that is, the space—in the world where the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is to be demonstrated and proclaimed. This space of the church does not, therefore, exist just for itself, but its existence is already always something that reaches far beyond it. This is because it is not the space of a cult that would have to fight for its own existence in the world. Rather, the space of the church is the place where witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ…The space of 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. It is not true that the church intends to or must spread its space out over the space of the world. It desires no more space than it needs to serve the world with its witness to Jesus Christ…The church can only defend its own space by fighting, not for space, but for the salvation of the world…So the first task given to those who belong to the church of God is not to be something for themselves…but to be witnesses of Jesus Christ to the world. For this the Holy Spirit equips those to whom the Spirit comes. Of course, it is presupposed that such a witness to the world can only happen in the right way when it comes out of a sanctified life in God’s church-community.¹

Here we see that Bonhoeffer incorporates his earlier tension between “distinction from” and “existence for” into a single vision of the church as a space in and for the world. The church is

¹ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 63-4.
indeed a distinct space—it belongs to Jesus and is sanctified by the Spirit. But this distinction, rather than secluding the community, serves its ministry of witness, enabling it to live unequivocally for the world. This does not require the church to glibly affirm everything the world offers. The community must remain free both to critique and affirm. The important point to note is that given Bonhoeffer’s Christological re-description of reality, the space of the church is penultimate in nature, serving to direct the community toward the ultimate, the reality of Christ himself. The church is a distinct space to the extent that in and through it the underlying unity of the world with Christ can shine through.

This vision of ecclesial space coheres with my analysis in earlier chapters. The call of Christ that creates the church as the *creatura verbi* does not miraculously implant a new communal substance into the world. The ontological issue has already been taken care of in Christ’s person and work—all things are reconciled to God in him. When Christ calls the church, he calls those already-reconciled pieces of the world into ongoing alignment with his own life and work as a means of his reality becoming evident here and now. Christ’s call is not a one-time event that permanently determines the essence of the community but an ongoing invitation to embody communal forms of life patterned after his. Thus, even as it must pursue its sanctification, the church’s value does not lie in its unique substance. It remains one worldly institution among countless others. Its life is sanctified not in that it somehow transcends its worldly constitution but in that it consistently orients itself toward the risen Christ. Just as Christ enacts his divine status through the history he lives, the church participates in his holiness—it pursues sanctification—as it looks toward him and walks his path. Contrary to culturally-competitive accounts of the church, Bonhoeffer’s account of the church’s holiness affirms the eccentricity and externality proper to the institution. As a historical-institutional entity and as a concrete gathering of bodies, the church itself “is merely an instrument, a
means to an end.” Its uniqueness cannot be ontologized. Bonhoeffer thus offers a paradoxical notion of space; he imagines the church as a distinct space precisely in that its spatial dimensions allow it to point beyond itself.

He expands on the missional implications of this notion of ecclesial space at the conclusion of his final Ethics manuscript. In particular, he rearticulates the tension between “distinction from” and “existence for” in terms of the community’s “double divine purpose”:

The Christian community stands in the place in which the whole world should stand. In this respect it serves the world as vicarious representative; it is there for the world’s sake. On the other hand, the place where the church-community stands is the place where the world fulfills its own destiny; the church-community is the ‘new creation,’ the ‘new creature,’ the goal of God’s ways on earth. In this dual vicarious representation, the church-community is in complete community with its Lord; it follows in discipleship the one who was the Christ precisely in being there completely for the world and not for himself…The church as a distinct corporate entity is thus subject to a double divine purpose, to both of which it must do justice, namely, being oriented toward the world, and, in this very act, simultaneously being oriented toward itself as the place where Jesus Christ is present…The danger of Roman Catholicism is that it understands the church essentially as an end in itself, at the expense of the divine mandate of proclaiming the word. Conversely, the danger of the Reformation is that it focuses exclusively on the mandate of proclaiming the word at the expense of attending to the church as a distinct domain and thus overlooks almost completely that the church is an end in itself, which consists precisely in its being-for-the-world.

Though stressing the penultimacy of ecclesial space might seem to undermine the importance of cultivating the space itself, Bonhoeffer makes no such move. For him, a life habituated within the space of the church remains a vital presupposition for missional faithfulness. Whereas some accounts of ecclesial formation place the community in conflict with the world, Bonhoeffer here imagines an account of formation that does the very opposite.

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2 Ibid., 404.

3 Ibid., 405-407.
Upon completing this paragraph, Bonhoeffer was arrested. There is something fitting about this biographical coincidence. Bonhoeffer was literally giving himself away in service as he theorized the ecclesiological basis for a church that could freely give itself away. Indeed, his ecclesiological reflections are richest at the point where his faithfulness is costliest.

**William Stringfellow’s Missional Hermeneutic**

I turn now to the imaginative task of picking up where Bonhoeffer left off. While a number of theologians could rightly guide me in this task, I here call upon William Stringfellow. Though separated from Bonhoeffer by a continent and a generation, Stringfellow stands as his heir on material grounds. His antipathy to American “religion” calls to mind Bonhoeffer’s famous non-religious critique, and it suggests that he offers a unique depiction of Bonhoeffer’s missional ecclesiology transplanted into the soil of post-WWII United States. For Stringfellow, like Bonhoeffer, this criticism has Christological grounding. If religion relegates itself to one particular segment of society, Jesus abolishes religion by uniting all reality to God. “The reconciliation of the world with God in Jesus Christ establishes man in a unity with both God and the whole world,”

Stringfellow claims, echoing Bonhoeffer’s Christological vision in *Ethics*. Most importantly for my purposes here, Stringfellow attempts to read Scripture in a way that follows suit. Among other

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4 Scholars today commonly recognize Stringfellow as an heir to Barth. During one of Barth’s lectures on his 1962 tour of the United States, he famously proclaimed, “You should listen to this man!” in reference to Stringfellow. As Barth put it in the “Forward to the American Edition,” in *Evangelical Theology*, trans. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963): While in the United States “I was with…the conscientious and thoughtful New York attorney William Stringfellow, who caught my attention more than any other person” (viii-ix). For more on the Barth-Stringfellow exchange, see Anthony Dancer, *An Alien in a Strange Land: Theology in the Life of William Stringfellow* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 166-182.

things, this means that he understands missional activity to be ingredient in the church’s faithful engagement with its text. Whereas Bonhoeffer lacked the opportunity to unpack the hermeneutical implications of his mature ecclesiology, Stringfellow develops a set of interpretive practices and habits that both emerge from and sustain a missional community.

Mission: Forming Communities of Resistance and Humanization

The similarities between Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow are not coincidental. It was, in fact, the latter’s personal interactions with Confessing Christians in Europe in the aftermath of WWII that originally inspired his account of Christian mission and his commitment to Scripture as a component of it. According to Stringfellow’s biographer, “It is at [the] time of his visit to Europe…that Stringfellow discovered, or rather was discovered by, God. It is at this point, perhaps motivated by what he saw with the Confessing Church, that he picked up his Bible, and figuratively never put it down again.” The Confessing Church’s resistance against Nazism particularly awed Stringfellow, especially to the extent that the task seemed overwhelmingly futile. “Each of these [efforts of resistance], if regarded in itself, seems far too weak, too temporary, too symbolic, too haphazard, too meek, too trivial to be efficacious against the oppressive, monolithic, pervasive presence of Nazism.” Indeed, “they were engaged in exceedingly hard and hapless and apparently

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6 In 1947 Stringfellow travelled to Europe for the World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo, where he first heard Martin Niemöller, one of the leaders of Confessing Church in Germany. Stringfellow travelled through Europe again in 1949, speaking on behalf of the World Student Christian Federation. This tour afforded him the opportunity to further encounter the Confessing Church and other resistance communities (Dancer, *Alien in a Strange Land*, 48). For Stringfellow’s firsthand account of his time in Europe after the fall of Nazism, see *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973), 117-133. Regarding his interaction with the work of Bonhoeffer specifically, see 131-133.


8 Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens*, 118. This is not, of course, to imply that all Confessing Christians succeeded in this resistance.
hopeless tasks.” Yet these Christians persevered with their “puny, foolish resistance.”

Acknowledging the temptation to romanticize these efforts, Stringfellow was thus compelled ask: why? Why would they take such risks?

The answer to this question gets to the heart of his missional theology: “[It] is, I believe, that the act of resistance to the power of death incarnate in Nazism was the only means of retaining sanity and conscience. In the circumstances of Nazi tyranny, resistance became the only human way to live.” Elsewhere he similarly asserts that to participate authentically in the church’s witness is to be a “humanized human being” who intercedes and publicly advocates for human life. The church in mission, he claims, seeks always to discover anew how it can “celebrate human life in society now.”

Hermeneutical implications begin to emerge as Stringfellow connects the dual acts of resistance and humanization to the practice of reading Scripture. “The other recollection which now visits me from listening to those same Resistance leaders concerns Bible study,” he writes. “I recall being slightly bemused…by the strenuous emphasis placed upon Bible study. No doubt that bewilderment reflected my own deprivation, a lack in my American churchly upbringing which I have since struggled gladly to overcome.” He concludes:

In this dimension of the Resistance, the Bible became alive as a means of nurture and communication; recourse to the Bible was in itself a primary, practical, and essential tactic of resistance. Bible study furnished the precedent for the free, mature, ecumenical, humanizing style of life which became characteristic of those of the confessing movement. This was an exemplary way—a sacrament, really…In Bible study within the anti-Nazi Resistance there was an

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9 Ibid., 119, emphasis original. On Hitler as a Principality and Power, see William Stringfellow, Free in Obedience (New York: Seabury, 1964), 55.

10 Stringfellow, An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens, 87. The resonances with Bonhoeffer’s notion of humanization in his Ethics manuscripts should be clear.

11 Ibid., 57.
edification of the new, or renewed, life to which human beings are incessantly called by God.12

Through his interactions with Confessing Christians, Stringfellow came to realize that Scripture functions as a tool of resistance to evil and thereby as a means of humanization. Scripture funds and sustains mission. In one sense, this claim seems fairly straightforward. As I mentioned in chapter 7, much recent work on the intersection of mission and hermeneutics makes a similar claim. Stringfellow is particularly useful for my account of reading within missional space because he also believes that the church’s struggle of resistance and humanization is itself the context within which scriptural interpretation takes place.

**Mission, Ideology, and Hermeneutics**

This is the case because Stringfellow, like Bonhoeffer, refuses to ontologize the distinction between the church and the world and instead affirms the unity of all things in Christ. He claims, for example, that the church is made up of the “ordinary things of the common existence of the world—bread, wine, water, money, cloth, color, music, words, or whatever else is readily at hand.”13 Even the holy things of worship are cut from worldly cloth. The uniqueness of the church, on his reading, lies not in the stuff of which it is made but in the use to which this stuff is put.14 The task of forming the church’s holiness, of sanctifying ecclesial space, is precisely the task of incorporating worldly realities into a new mode of existence by orienting them toward Jesus.

12 Ibid., 120, emphasis original.

13 Ibid., 126. Here Stringfellow echoes Barth; see *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 724-5.

14 As Stringfellow claims in *A Public and Private Faith*, Christians are simply those who come out of the world’s posture now and then to worship the Lord (43).
This points toward Stringfellow’s most meaningful contribution to contemporary theology. In order for the church to align itself with Christ, it must also dis-align itself from the patterns and powers of death that determine “the ways of this world” (Eph. 2:2, NIV). On Stringfellow’s reading, the effect of the fall is that the good things of creation come to exist “in a condition of estrangement” rather than in harmony with God and each other. To borrow Miroslav Volf’s terminology, the principalities and powers erect “impenetrable boundaries” of exclusion. If Christ overcomes the effects of the fall by drawing all things together, breaking down dividing walls of hostility (Eph. 2:14), the powers seek to re-erect these walls, thereby dichotomizing, isolating, and segregating the world. In this way, the principalities and powers forcefully militate against the unity of all reality in Christ.

In so doing, the powers fund a competitive account of individual and institutional life. In a world of fragmented and self-enclosed entities, persons and institutions turn their gaze upon themselves as they vie for space and survival. Stringfellow claims, therefore, that self-regard is the most worldly form of existence. Even the church can fall under the influence of the powers. Calling to mind Bonhoeffer’s prison critique, Stringfellow suggests that “the morality of survival” and the

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15 See, among many examples, Stringfellow, An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens, 67-116 and William Stringfellow, Conscience and Obedience: The Politics of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in Light of the Second Coming (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977), 55-74. One of the most obvious signs of Stringfellow’s theological legacy is his significant influence on Walter Wink. Wink came under the influence of Stringfellow while the former was a student worker in the East Harlem Protestant Parish. For an example of Stringfellow’s influence on Wink, see Walter Wink, “Stringfellow on the Powers,” in Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer, ed. Andrew W. McThenia (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 17-31.

16 Stringfellow, Free in Obedience, 62.


18 Stringfellow, An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens, 92.
“ethic of maintenance”19 are as rampant within Christian congregations and denominations as other institutions.

One particularly baleful consequence accompanies this account of worldliness: the gospel, like the community that proclaims it, becomes a mechanism of competition cordoned within a particular segment of worldly existence and captive to reality’s fragmentation. In Stringfellow’s unique terminology, the gospel is reduced to ideology. There are, of course, as many ways to ideologize the gospel as there are cultures and institutions competing for existence in the world.20 Given the dichotomized pattern of political life in the United States, Stringfellow speaks of two temptations in particular. One is fundamentally conservative. It tends to confine the church to the sanctuary, turning the community into “an innocuous, isolationist religious society,” what Bonhoeffer calls a church on the margins.21 The other is fundamentally progressive. It tends to assimilate the gospel to a particular cultural moment. Both errors are, at heart, Christological. According to Stringfellow, they “secretly assume that God is a stranger among us”22—at least until certain cultural and political conditions make way for God’s arrival.23 In other words, both postures make Christ captive to a particular ideological vision, thereby rendering the gospel contingent.

At this point Stringfellow boldly retorts: “Biblical politics never implies a particular, elaborated political theology...The Gospel is not ideology, and, categorically, the Gospel cannot be

19 Stringfellow, A Private and Public Faith, 14.
21 Stringfellow, Private and Public Faith, 19; also see Conscience and Obedience, 102-105.
22 Stringfellow, My People is the Enemy, 97.
ideologized.” For Stringfellow, in other words, the gospel brings about its own social manifestations; it calls forth its own unique patterns of lived existence. Compared to its false alternatives, a non-ideologized gospel thus has universal scope and is free to take root in any cultural situation. A church that lives according to this gospel is free to be for the world without first having to be against it. Stringfellow puts it plainly: “The meaning of Jesus Christ is that the Word of God is addressed to people, to all people, in the very events and relationships...that constitute our existence in the world.”

The powers that threaten to ideologize the gospel also exert force over the act of reading Scripture. Co-opted by the powers, ideological readings bend toward particular cultural or institutional ends. Rather than fostering a mode of attentiveness to Christ’s ongoing love for the world, they propagate a hermeneutical myopia that serves provincial ends. In this sense, an insular hermeneutic—even if insulated within a highly religious culture—is actually a worldly hermeneutic, i.e., one that falls under the influence of the powers and consequently plays by the rules of cultural competition. Such readings fund the ongoing segregation of reality and the competitive forms of existence that emerge therefrom, thereby enclosing the church within a hermeneutical echo chamber. In just this way, the powers, like the serpent in the garden, seek to draw attention away from God, proffering the seductive words of ideology as a replacement for God’s living voice.

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24 Stringfellow, Conscience and Obedience, 111-112. According to Stringfellow, “ideology” is perhaps the most self-evident principality. More specifically, he suggests that ideology is the lifeblood of principalities. As examples, he lists communism, fascism, racism, nationalism, humanism, capitalism, and democracy (57-59). As a culturally contingent system of human thought and value, ideology functions to structure reality in a way that serves that unique interests of those within a particular historical, cultural, and geographical moment. To ideologize the gospel, therefore, is to turn it into an instrument that serves the particular purposes of a certain culture or group. An ideologized gospel is one over which humans have control. A non-ideologized gospel, on the other hand, remains definitively God’s, and as such it calls people, cultures, and institutions to place themselves in the service of God’s purposes.

25 Stringfellow, My People Is the Enemy, 97.
At first glance, such readings possess a certain allure, tempting the reading community with the prospect of certainty, stability, and the assured perpetuation of cultural life. As Bonhoeffer realized, for instance, ideologues are never forced into the difficult process of grappling with uncertainty, for they possess at their disposal an unambiguous standard by which to judge particular outcomes and actions.\(^{26}\) Like the serpent, ideology promises easy understanding, knowledge without a cost. When this logic is pressed, the very problem of *coming to understand* no longer exists; prefabricated knowledge short-circuits the rationale underlying the hermeneutical process as it answers questions before they are even asked. Hence, as Stringfellow realized, when the powers reduce the gospel to ideology, there is little need to turn to Scripture anew. To read Scripture within ideologized space is to admit (even if only implicitly) that one no longer needs the Bible; it is to leave the Bible “chained to the altar” —whether the altar of tradition or any host of non-ecclesial institutions and cultures.

While Bonhoeffer directs his prison critique toward a fundamentally conservative iteration of the gospel’s ideologization, Stringfellow remained uniquely attuned to the opposite temptation.\(^{27}\) During his contentious and short-lived stint with the East Harlem Protestant Parish (EHPP), he encountered a form of Christian existence that, in his estimate, sacrificed ecclesial distinctiveness for the putative purpose of missional effectiveness.\(^{28}\) Stringfellow is especially pertinent to the argument

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\(^{26}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 227.

\(^{27}\) Of course, both offer critiques in either direction. In particular, Bonhoeffer’s reaction to the liberal Protestantism he encountered in New York foreshadows Stringfellow’s sentiments. See, e.g., “Report on His Year of Study” (DBWE 10, 305-319) and, most famously, “Protestantism without the Reformation” (DBWE 15, 438-462).

\(^{28}\) In response to the conservative evangelical revival that tended to deemphasize social and material realities, recent graduates from Union Seminary founded the EHPP in 1948 as a means of caring for the needy in Harlem, which at that time was one of the most destitute cities in the country. This community and its mission initially attracted Stringfellow, and he joined immediately upon graduating from Harvard Law School. But motivated by strong theological convictions, he resigned just fifteen months later (his work, *My People Is the Enemy*, is an expanded version of his resignation letter). With characteristic frankness he declared that the EHPP had become a fallen principality. He believed, in other words,
in this chapter because he recognized that in softening its distinctly ecclesial dimensions, the EHPP simultaneously loosened its grip on Scripture. He suggests, in other words, that the EHPP’s particular form of ideology necessarily closed the Bible.  

He laments that members of the mission became “appalling diffident toward the Bible…Those who were the most self-serious about the analysis of culture and society were most often the dilettantes in Bible study…Apparently, some of the clergy felt that Bible study was unnecessary, since they had already learned all they needed to of the Bible in seminary.”  

Even as the community remained steadfastly committed to serving the community, listening to the text was no longer an essential component of this missional practice.

On Stringfellow’s diagnosis, the implicit mindset operative in the EHPP was that reading Scripture and engaging the world are two distinct and sequentially ordered events. Scripture perhaps exerted a missional function for the community to the extent that it originally inspired mission. But Scripture was unable to function within it. In practice this means that when the Bible was opened within the EHPP, “the minds of some were filled with notions of truth, ideas of good, with interesting hypotheses, strong sentiments, and current events…But few seemed ready just to listen to the Word of God.”  

Coming to the text with read-made commitments, the community had no need to attend freshly to God’s Word to the church through it. Listening and discernment had ceased to be hermeneutical virtues.

that in so blatantly ideologizing the gospel, in bending it toward a particular agenda, the EHPP had reduced the gospel to a human cause. According to Stringfellow, this undermined the very possibility of ministry. To commit oneself wholeheartedly to a human agenda is in fact to forfeit the freedom necessary to serve the living Christ (see Dancer, An Alien in a Strange Land, 79-86).


30 Ibid., 136.

31 Ibid.
We thus see that both forms of ideologization—i.e., sequestering or secularizing the church—fund a notably similar hermeneutical posture. The temptation in both cases is to assume that reading in the church stands at odds with reading in the world, which subsequently pressures the church to adopt a hermeneutical posture that remains alert to one or the other. In both cases, the church is construed as a competitive space, and, consequently, hermeneutical answers are ready at hand, the product of whichever ideology holds sway.

Reading in Exile

For just these reasons, an ideological hermeneutic stands at odds with a missional hermeneutic. A missional community pursues no particular ends other than God’s and has no self-serving desire that is not always also a world-serving desire. An unconventional metaphor helps Stringfellow give voice to a form of ecclesial life that overcomes these tensions. The circus, he claims, often looks more like the church than the professed church.\(^{32}\) “Biblical people, like circus folk, live typically as sojourners, interrupting time, with a few possessions, and in tents, in this world…The church would likely be more faithful if the church were similarly nomadic.”\(^{33}\) For Stringfellow, in other words, the church, like the circus, is both in the world and yet free to be nomadic, constituted by the stuff of the world and yet free to put that stuff to strange and surprising use. The church certainly has universal scope—it can plant its feet in any time and place—but it

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\(^{32}\) William Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith: My Experience in Mourning* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 100. Stringfellow was intimately familiar with the circus. He and his closest friend Anthony Townes spent the summer of 1966 travelling with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus through New England and New York. In Stringfellow’s words “we outfitted a station wagon so that it could be used for sleeping and joined the circus company en route, booked in a new city each day, traveling late each night in the circus convoy to the next day’s stand (*Simplicity of Faith*, 86-88).

never becomes a prisoner of that place. Precisely in being concretely located, in setting up its tents, the church possesses the capacity to surprise, to testify to a startlingly different reality.

Stringfellow’s call to be sojourning “circus folk” calls to mind the biblical theme of exile. The uniqueness of his theological imagination and the unique basis for his missional hermeneutic emerges in his vision of the church as an exilic community. Of course, the theme of exile per se does not alone provide ecclesiological solutions.34 If one temptation is to secure existence in the midst of exile by embodying an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the land in which one has been scattered, the opposite temptation is to sacrifice communal distinctiveness for the sake of living well in that land.35 By refusing to ontologize the church or ideologize the gospel, Stringfellow avoids these common pitfalls, thereby envisioning a church that is distinct and yet non-oppositional. When the danger facing the community is not the world per se but the powers therein that attempt to co-opt the things of the world toward the ends of death, the church is free to move to center of reality while yet remaining

34 Bonhoeffer’s own theological development testifies to this. As the Kirchenkampf intensified and his post-Christendom vision began to emerge, exilic Israel took on new significance in his theology. Near the end of his Finkenwalde period, for example, he likens the Confessing Church to exilic Israel. In particular, he narratively locates it within the story of Israel’s renewal under Ezra (DBWE 14:928). On the “exilic” nature of Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde imagination, see Barry Harvey, Taking Hold of the Real: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Profound Worldliness of Christianity (Cambridge: James Clark & Co, 2015), 229. The notion of culture purity on display in Ezra calls to mind the onesided tendency toward seclusion that was at times present during his Finkenwalde period. As I have argued above, this onesidedness gains complexity with time. Yet even as Bonhoeffer’s theology develops during the war time years and his ecclesiology moves beyond the limits of the Ezran vision, the notion of exile remains an operative feature of his imagination. Barry Harvey argues, for example, that Bonhoeffer’s “religionless” account of Christianity in prison is something like being in exile; see his “Life in Exile in the Middle of the Village: A Contribution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Post-Christendom Ecclesiology,” in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology Today: A Way Between Fundamentalism and Secularism? ed. John W. de Gruchy, Stephen Plant, and Christiane Tietz (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009), 229-243. “Seeking to live without God before God,” on this reading, is to live before God in a world that is without the traditional structures and settled-ness that results from living with God in the land. Bonhoeffer’s own ecclesiological development—from the Ezra-inspired vision of distinction in 1935 to his Jeremianic vision in prison in 1944—represents the various possibilities facing an exilic ecclesiology.

free from worldly patterns and thus free for the world. To put it in biblical idiom, the church is free to live in a strange land and yet sing the songs of the Lord (Ps. 137:4).

For Stringfellow, a church in exile that is distinct and yet non-oppositionally, a church that is free both to be fully present to the world and fully equipped to surprise it, must accept the ad hoc and improvisational nature of faithfulness. A sojourning church, in other words, can embrace what Stringfellow refers to as the necessary inconsistency of Christian life. Christians, in their “fidelity to the gospel...will appear inconsistent to others in public views and positions,” he claims. “They cannot be put into a neat pigeonhole, their stances and conduct are never easily predictable. Christians are nonideological persons in politics, and there is no other label appropriate for them than Christian.”

By stressing inconsistency he does not mean that the gospel is random or that Christ lacks consistent features. He means, instead, that a community that resists the powers without resorting to sectarianism will inevitably appear inconsistent in the eyes of others. Ideologues will lack categories by which to make sense of its actions.

Bonhoeffer has something similar in mind when he confronts the threat of “timeless discipleship.” Within idealized space, ecclesial faithfulness inevitably drifts toward the consistency

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36 William Stringfellow, Dissenter in a Great Society: A Christian View of America in Crisis (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 161-162. Stringfellow even suggests that the inconsistency that marks the church’s faithful action in the world should similarly characterize its reading of Scripture. He claims, for example, that manufacturing a harmonized canon would categorically abolish “the mystery of revelation in this world” (Conscience and Obedience, 10). Artificially systematizing Scripture, in other words, would require the reading community to impose foreign criteria upon it—i.e., to ideologize the text—which would necessarily undercut the ongoing freedom of the word in and through the text. Thus, perhaps counterintuitively, Stringfellow values contradictions in Scripture and willingly seeks them out, claiming that they serve as “a clue to the vitality of the Word of God in the world” (Conscience and Obedience, 11). Indeed, this goal constitutes the very structure of Conscience and Obedience, in which he attempts to hold together Romans 13 and Revelation 13, two texts that seem to offer contradictory visions of Christian political involvement. In the preface to that work he admits that after writing An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land, which makes great use of the theme of Babylon in Revelation, he felt compelled, as a means of respecting the word’s freedom, “to deal bluntly with other parts of the New Testament witness which prima facie bespoke different views” (9).

37 See Schlingensiepen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 294; Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 678.
of abstraction. As Bonhoeffer recognized, however, this impedes ongoing movement into the world. Consequently, the church falls out of touch with the historicity of its existence and thereby forfeits all “encounter with life, with actual people.”\textsuperscript{38} Buttressed by prefabricated commitments, the church’s patterns of reading and thinking remain unaffected by the others to whom the gospel freely moves. But if the word of God “is openly and notoriously active in the world”\textsuperscript{39} and “present in all events,”\textsuperscript{40} as Stringfellow consistently avers, hermeneutical faithfulness must embrace the risk entailed in moving beyond its safe confines.

To read as an exilic community is thus to admit that hermeneutical practices must arise within mission itself. “Christians must enter the common life of the world fully and unequivocally in order to know the Word of God,” Stringfellow writes.\textsuperscript{41} Elsewhere he suggests that various forms of movement beyond the traditional boundaries of the church “are welcome to Christians as enhancements of the knowledge of the fullness of the Word of God” and that “Christians can only comprehend the Word out of their involvement in this world.”\textsuperscript{42} He contends, in other words, that active engagement in the world stands as a prerequisite for hermeneutical faithfulness. A church determined by Christ’s work of reconciliation is free to recognize that the movement of meaning runs in two directions, from the community to the world and from the world to the community. Stringfellow’s missional ecclesiology therefore demands a dexterous hermeneutical posture that at

\textsuperscript{38} Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 247-8.
\textsuperscript{39} Stringfellow, \textit{Private and Public Faith}, 17.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{42} William Stringfellow, \textit{Count It All Joy} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 16.
once affirms the mutually reinforcing nature of immersion in Scripture and immersion in the world.43

A Located Hermeneutic

Stringfellow adds practical specificity to this missional hermeneutic by stressing the concrete practice of being located. The church, he claims, must be “deeply implicated in the real life of society—in unions and political clubs and citizen groups and the like.” It does not suffice for Christians to gather “off by themselves in a parish house to study and discuss social issues.” Rather, he suggests, faithfulness “becomes possible only when the Christian is on the actual scene where the conflict is taking place, the decision is being made, the legislation is being enacted.”44 This sentiment parallels Bonhoeffer’s suggestion that God’s word “can only be heard by one who is bound to a specific place and time.”45 Stringfellow intentionally contrasts his vision of concrete locatedness with what he believed to be its counterfeit—the belief that mere knowledge of a context is sufficient to live and think faithfully. Dialogue with the world is not simply a cerebral exchange; it requires concrete meetings, embodied presence, and intentional interactions. The church must enact the utter historicity of hermeneutics through distinct practices of locatedness within a particular historical and geographical location. For Stringfellow, in short, in order to read Scripture faithfully, the church must read within a place and in perpetual encounter with it.

43 See Paddison, “Theological Interpretation and the Bible as Public Text.”
44 Stringfellow, Private and Public Faith, 54.
45 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, 379.
The ecclesiology that has heretofore emerged stands as a necessary presupposition for this practice of hermeneutical locatedness. Only a non-ontologized community that refuses to be co-opted into patterns of institutional competition—a community that is free from the ways of death operative in the world—can at once be geographically specific and yet not culturally captive. For such a community, retreat, seclusion, and opposition no longer stand as prerequisites for its prophetic leverage vis-à-vis its particular locale, and assimilation and secularization are no longer the only means by which to become present to the cultural moment.

This hermeneutical posture marks Stringfellow’s own interpretive engagements. His main theological and ethical works arise from a particular moment and take the form of socially located and culturally specific biblical engagement. In one of his main works, for example, he claims that his interpretive goal is “to understand America biblically—not the other way around.”46 Besides shining light on the perennial problem of reading Scripture “Americanly,” as he calls it, this statement reveals his unique manner of missional reading. His goal in engaging Scripture is not merely to understand the text or distill timeless ideas from it. Rather, he aims to understand the context in light of the text—or, more precisely, to hear the text as a particular word to a particular context. Some may say that this stated goal precludes genuine biblical interpretation. After all, critics may argue, figures such as Kennedy, King, and Nixon, events such as the Vietnam War and Watergate, or institutions such as the CIA, FBI, and Madison Avenue—all prevalent components of Stringfellow’s located readings during the postwar decades—are relevant, at best, as features of second order application after the real work of interpretation is done.

46 Stringfellow, An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens, 13.
Stringfellow would disagree. Given the missional nature of hermeneutical space, these seemingly extra-biblical entities cannot be neatly cordoned from the reading process. In fact, they may actually help make sense of the text, just as the text makes sense of them. This is certainly not to subordinate the text to the context; Scripture remains primary. But to believe that the Bible must first speak abstractly before it speaks to the present moment is to forget that the text is a living word that witnesses to a Lord active in history and that embodiment and historicity are integral to knowledge. Stringfellow states the matter directly: “Uses of the Bible are subject to the discipline of God’s own living Word as such and not the other way around.”

For this reason, his written engagements with Scripture do not take the form of an abstract conversation between an exegete and a text—the common form of published biblical exposition, and one that possesses stability across time and place. Rather, his work takes the form of a conversation between Scripture and a particular slice of the world, with Stringfellow himself facilitating the discussion. To us, several decades removed, his writings come across as time-bound and dated. Stringfellow would suggest that this is a sign of interpretive virtue, the necessary form of a missional community’s engagement with a word that is alive and active in the world.

**Habits of Missional Reading**

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47 Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, 17.

48 This certainly does not nullify the value of biblical exposition that seeks to shine light upon the text as a historical or literary document. The logic of mission as Stringfellow understands it simply reminds us that such products should not take the place of actual interpretation. In other words, such written products possess utility within the church precisely in their ability to make readers sensitive to the topography of the text and alert to the linguistic force of its words and phrases—and thereby to lead them every more deeply into the text itself.
The church’s practice of missional movement and locatedness calls for practices that frame the actual process of reading the text. Three practices carry particularly relevance for Stringfellow: the practice of methodological freedom, constant re-reading, and attentive discernment.

Regarding the former, he claims that since “ideology is inherent in methodology,” the church must sit loosely with various methodological proposals and therefore must refuse to be hampered by a commitment to any particular method or mode of reading.49 In lamenting the ideological nature of methodology, he does not mean that some method-less reading is possible, much less that it should be pursued. Nor does this amount to an outright dismissal of critical methods. Precisely because “the Word of God is free and active in the world,” the theological value of Scripture as a witness to that word cannot be fettered by any particular method, whether it be “textual criticism, linguistic analysis, demythologizing, or vernacular translation.”50 Whereas a certain conception of ecclesial space might undermine the theological value of such methods, perhaps even deeming them antithetical to an ecclesial hermeneutic, Stringfellow remains blithely unconcerned. Instead of a posture of fear that views certain modes of reading as threats to cultural life, he champions open and critical inquiry into the text. Forms of reading that could at first seem “worldly” might actually expand the church’s hermeneutical imagination and provide surprising insights into the ongoing life of Christ in the world.

49 William Stringfellow, “Myths, Endless Genealogies, the Promotion of Speculations and the Vain Discussions Thereof,” Sojourners (August 1997): 13. Importantly, methodological enslavement stands as a temptation regardless of the method one holds. For example, the Reformers opted for sola scriptura because they felt Scripture was enslaved to the church; today, theological interpreters are seeking to return Scripture to the church because they feel it is enslaved to the very historical-critical methods that the Reformation made possible. No method, per se, can overcome the temptation toward enslavement.

50 Stringfellow, Count It All Joy, 16.
Even as Stringfellow upholds the value of criticism, his ability to locate ideology within methodology reminds us that critical readings, as important as they are, can remain just as ideologically bound as any other—and for this reason may in reality remain insufficiently critical.\(^{51}\) Contrary to the common modern assumption, therefore, Stringfellow’s missional hermeneutic holds open the counterintuitive possibility that reading distinctly as the church can fund authentically critical interaction with Scripture. The reason for this, as I have been arguing in this project, is that ecclesial reading criticizes not only the text but its readers; self-criticism is built into the very posture from which the community engages Scripture. The community reads, in other words, recognizing that the powers operative in the world threaten to co-opt its own intentions and actions. From a missional posture that remains dexterously attuned to the ongoing freedom of Christ in the world, the church is free to hear a word it did not speak and thus to encounter meaning that is more than an ideological echo.\(^{52}\)

This self-criticism is necessary given the hermeneutical effects of sin, as I suggested in earlier chapters, but it also follows from the logic of mission itself. If the church in mission never settles, neither can its reading practices. Just as circus folk pick and choose from the stuff of the world in order to interrupt and surprise it, a sojourning church must maintain ongoing and critical hermeneutical freedom. Bracketed by a fundamental trust in Christ’s promise to walk the road with his people, the church is free to be always suspicious—of the text, of interpretations, of readers, even of suspicion itself.\(^{53}\) Stringfellow’s underlying methodological point is that when located within

\(^{51}\) On the ideological nature of biblical criticism, see, as a leading example, Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).


\(^{53}\) On this latter point, see Rowan Williams, “The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer,” in *Wrestling with Angels*, 186-202. Williams notes that uncritical use of suspicion, as it seeks to unmask outer facades in
a church that pursues Jesus, a multivalent hermeneutic of suspicion need not paralyze the interpretive process but may actually liberate it, opening space for joyful, creative, and extemporaneous interpretive performances. The very posture that allows the community to keep step behind a living Lord is the posture from which the community becomes free to deploy critical tools critically.

This points toward a second habit of missional reading. A church that practices methodological freedom must return to the text again and again, for as Stringfellow argues, non-ideological living requires “a spontaneous, intimate, and incessant involvement in the biblical Word as such.” The inconsistency that characterizes missional faithfulness requires one to cling closely to the text. Without the certainty afforded by ideology, the church must turn to Scripture ever anew. Instead of resorting to preconceived commitments, a missional community is free to recognize that “the inexorable dynamic of pilgrimage and the eschatological tension of exile render every answer tentative, partial, and situational in the best sense of the word.” If ideology stagnates, both missionally and hermeneutically, then Christ’s ongoing freedom in history compels the community continually to return to the text—not necessarily as a means of improving on old readings but as a means of receiving wisdom anew for the moment.

A missional hermeneutic that retains methodological freedom and engages in constant re-reading requires a third key practice: the practice of attentive discernment. Indeed, Stringfellow

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pursue an object’s hidden essence, can actually do violence to the singularity of an “other” (whether a person or a text) and in this sense militates against the temporality, particularity, and locatedness necessary to Christian mission.

54 Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens*, 151.

55 Schlabach, “Deteronomic or Constantinian,” 461.
suggests that “the gift of discernment is basic to the genius of the biblical life style.”

On the one hand, this ought to characterize all facets of the church’s life. If all reality is unified in Christ, then a missional community is free to listen for the word both as it gathers to hear Scripture and as it moves through the world. Rather than seeing itself as the agent of the word’s contextualization, the missional community is free to listen attentively for the word that contextualizes itself. On the other hand, the attentiveness that characterizes the church’s life in the world also characterizes its approach toward the text itself. I have suggested already that a competitive ecclesiology militates against both the need and possibility of hearing from God anew in Scripture. According to Stringfellow, this is why those in EHPP were unwilling actually to read it. In response to this threat, he routinely couples his account of interpretive theory with an articulation of patient listening: “A person must come to the Bible quietly, eagerly expectantly—ready to listen. One must (as nearly as one can) confront the Bible naively, that is, as if one had not encountered the Bible previously.”

Calling to mind the practices of un-mastery I discussed in Part One, he suggests that “the versatility of God’s self-witness in the Bible and continually in the world” means that Christians must become “vulnerable to the Word of God.” Only the mature Christian who embodies this posture “is freed to discern the word of God at work now in the world.” Stringfellow boldly claims that “the single most significant credential needed for comprehending the Bible is an intention to listen to the Word. For that, a person must not merely desire to hear the Word of God, but must also be free to hear [it].” I have argued in Part Four that a missional ecclesiology provides the space for such freedom.

56 Stringfellow, An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens, 138.
57 Stringfellow, Keeper of the Word, 183.
58 Ibid., 171-172.
59 Ibid., 182, emphasis added.
Even as Stringfellow was attuned to the danger of wedding the gospel to a progressive social program, his account of the church in mission carries certain risks. If the peril of Christendom is a church without a mission, then the danger lurking within a vision like Stringfellow’s is a mission without a church. Indeed, some of the central features of his theology appear at first glance to mirror larger missional trends in the 1960s and 1970s. Bosch notes, for example, that after WWII the early twentieth century notion of “church as conqueror of the world” (paradigmatically expressed at the 1910 Edinburgh conference) became “the church in solidarity with the world.”

Radical socio-political changes—in the form of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. and in the form of post-colonial independence internationally—infused great confidence into movements that sought social change. Bosch suggests that with this confidence came the temptation to secularize the calling of the church, often by highlighting the church’s role in the process of “humanization”—which, as we have seen, is indeed central to Stringfellow’s missional theology. Bosch worries that with this turn toward humanization, the notion of “mission” devolves into “an umbrella term for health and welfare services…projects for economic and social development, the constructive application of violence, etc.…The distinction between church and world has, for all intents and purposes, been dropped completely.”

The danger, in short, is that the stress on humanity as a general category draws attention away from the church as a particular community with a particular

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60 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 377.
61 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 383.
message. Echoing Bosch’s inclinations, critics have wondered whether Stringfellow’s ecclesiology can account for the ongoing distinctiveness and integrity of the church.62

Stringfellow was indeed aware that his theology, from a certain perspective, seems to diminish the importance of the church as an institution. He affirms, for example, that the actions and practices of the church “would be so much more important if they did not always have to watch for the presence and initiative of the Word of God in history.”63 Taking its cues from Christ, ecclesiology is a “hectic doctrine,” Stringfellow admits. But as he goes on to claim, this hecticness is only viewed as a problem from within “the Constantinian mentality.” At this point of tension the solution is not to find ways to secure and stabilize the church but to break away “from the Constantinian indoctrination in order to affirm the poise of the church awaiting the second advent of Jesus.”64 Stringfellow would have us see, then, that in being alert to Christ himself, the church is both hectic and poised. Hectic—because there is no political arrangement that would guarantee its stability, because the distinction between church and world is not one over which it has control, and because Jesus Christ freely lives. Poised—because it nevertheless possesses the resources to wait consistently and hopefully upon the Lord.

Stringfellow thus has no intentions of demeaning the church as an institution. Nor is he trying to soften Christianity’s sharp edges or make the faith palatable to non-Christians. His point, as usual, is Christological. To relativize the distinction between church and world and to recast it in non-ontological terms is not to deny that the church possesses perduring features but to suggest that

62 Mark Thiessen Nation claims, for example, that Stringfellow fails to recognize the need for ongoing structures and institutions to sustain the church through time; see “The Vocation of the Church of Jesus the Criminal,” in William Stringfellow in Anglo-American Perspective, ed. Anthony Dancer (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 114-124.

63 Stringfellow, Keeper of the Word, 138.

64 Stringfellow, Conscience and Obedience, 105.
the significance of the church is found not in these features themselves but in the way of life they facilitate, in the one toward whom they orient the church. In contrast to culturally competitive accounts of ecclesial distinctiveness, Stringfellow offers an account of the church’s peculiar features that directs attention beyond itself.

This poise takes concrete shape in the church’s liturgical life. In contrast to the secularized mission on display in the EHPP—in which, Stringfellow laments, “the liturgical life of the congregations grew erratic”\(^{65}\)—he believes that only the consistent enactment of the liturgy can sustain the church’s engagement with the death-dealing forces at work in the world. The liturgy sustains faithful mission precisely to the extent that it continually reorients the community away from itself and toward the true source of its life. The church’s liturgy, Stringfellow therefore avers, simultaneously enacts its peculiarity, establishes its institutional distinctiveness, and facilitates its constant movement into the world.

Noting the liturgical shape of missional space is a fitting way to conclude my examination of Stringfellow’s missional hermeneutic. For him, it is precisely the rhythm of liturgy that unites both dimensions of the text’s missional function. Scripture lies behind mission, nurturing and empowering the community for movement into the world. And liturgy facilitates a mode of hermeneutical engagement in the act of mission itself. By constantly directing Christians to their Lord, liturgy sustains a mode of perception appropriate to reality. As people are “enlightened by the Word of God within the congregation…they will become sensitive and perceptive of the Word of God as they encounter [it] in the common life of the world.”\(^{66}\) Liturgy thus establishes “a rhythm in

\(^{65}\) Stringfellow, *Keeper of the Word*, 133.

\(^{66}\) Stringfellow, *Private and Public Faith*, 52.
the Christian’s life encompassing intimacy with the Word of God in the Bible and one’s involvement with the same Word active in the world.”

**Conclusion: Stringfellow, Bonhoeffer, and the Church as a Missional Space**

In Part Four I have argued that the church exists in a missionary relationship to the world and that this carries implications for its scriptural hermeneutic. Indeed, the very task of ecclesial hermeneutics—the church’s attempt to understand what is not immediately understandable—arises from Christ’s livelihood, the concomitant movement of the gospel, and the church’s call “to remain in step with God.” The very fact that the church engages in ongoing struggle with the texts implies that Christ is on the move in the world through the Spirit. Christ’s mobility is the necessary presupposition for the hermeneutical task, its very *raison d’être*.

For the church, therefore, the task of hermeneutics is necessarily missional. If Christ were inert or if his ongoing life could be conflated into a certain cultural pattern, the hermeneutical problem would vanish. Yet the out-ahead-ness of the Risen One undercuts the notion that any particular representation of him is pure and pristine, abstractly relevant for all times and places. The church is a space for reading, then, because as a missionary body it is called to resist ideologically produced stagnation and instead follow Christ into the world. Because it is a missional space the church is a mobile space, and its hermeneutic must follow suit.

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67 Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, 20. Compare this to the two-part rhythm of prayer and justice that characterizes Bonhoeffer’s arcane discipline.

68 Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 8, 228.
Thus my question in Part Four has been neither “What does the Bible say about mission?” nor “What does the topic of mission help us understand about Scripture?” These questions are important, but my guiding question has been: What does mission imply about the mode of the church’s engagement with Scripture? What does it mean to read as a missional community and within missional space? I began to answer this question in chapter 7 as I followed Bonhoeffer’s lead in articulating a missional ecclesiology that makes possible and sustains this hermeneutical posture. In contrast to a hermeneutic that presupposes a bifurcated account of church and mission, Bonhoeffer depicts a church that is always and only the church in mission. The space for reading, then, is the space constituted by Christ’s address and that corresponds to his ongoing movement in and for the world.

In chapter 8 I have turned to Stringfellow to help examine the specifically hermeneutical implications of this ecclesiology. Following his lead, I sketched the contours of a missional hermeneutic of Scripture. If ideology produces propaganda, the rhetoric of the powers, a missional community is free to become mobile and for this reason holds potential to offer non-ideologized readings that disrupt the regular patterns of worldly existence. Sustained by a liturgical framework that enacts the unity of all reality in Christ and embracing the contingency of its cultural-geographic location, the church is free to read—and re-read—Scripture as it attempts to keep step with God.

Together, Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow provide the theological resources for an ecclesiology that can take the world seriously as a theological category without underplaying the distinctiveness of ecclesial space. The church must have an identity. But it does not secure this identity by buttressing a sacred sanctuary that exists in distinction from the world. Rather, the church discovers its identity as it moves into the very heart of the world, witnessing to the world’s reconciliation to God in Christ. I have therefore argued in this chapter that one need not retreat from the world in order to read
Scripture faithfully. At the same time, one need not leave ecclesial space and liturgical life in order to become fully present in the world. As Stringfellow notes, the seemingly progressive mindset of some mission agencies actually re-inscribes a veiled form of two-realms thinking that produces yet another iteration of pseudo-gospel ideology. And perhaps ironically, it severs mission from the essence of the church, implying that one must leave the latter behind in order to fully enter the world. It further implies that encountering the word in Scripture and moving into the heart of the world are distinct and disconnected events.

Thus, missional theology need not, as some suggest, “seek the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the church.” This sentiment is right to the extent that the church need not prioritize its own survival and must reject an ethic of maintenance. But a community that is both exilic and non-oppositional, both hectic and poised, both landless and located, must refuse the choice. Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow would have us believe that the church discovers (and continually re-discovers) its own best interests precisely as it seeks the welfare of the city—which, after all, is Jeremiah’s original promise to exiled Israel: “But seek the welfare of the city…for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7).

Following Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow, I have sketched an account of the church that can, in fact, receive its welfare in this way. By overcoming the errors of isolationism, competition, and assimilation that tempt post-Christendom ecclesiologies, I have depicted a church that is free to exist as a distinct community in perpetual missional movement, an exilic and yet non-oppositional community. As Stringfellow has helped us see, this sort of missional freedom calls for an array of habits and practices that sustain a hermeneutical process enacted not merely in light of mission but

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in it. Such a community is free to be circus-like and nomadic, free from the predictability of ideology, and thus free to surprise and interrupt the world with the good news of its reconciliation to God in Christ.
Conclusion

A simple pastoral question has catalyzed this dissertation: how should Christians read the Bible? The basic assumption guiding my answer, and one that has brought me into conversation with an array of recent voices, is that this reading, however precisely it happens, is a reading done in the church. This immediately raises the question: what do we mean by “church” such that it can house our reading of Scripture? In what sense is the church a hermeneutical space?

The critical conviction guiding my answer to this question is that although various forms of “ecclesial hermeneutics” have emerged in recent decades, the ecclesiology underlying them has been more often implied than stated directly. When attention has been paid to the nature of the church in which reading occurs—as is the case with the main interlocutors in this work—one particular aspect of the church tends to carry the bulk of the hermeneutical weight.

As I have shown in each of the four parts that comprise this dissertation, four main dimensions of the church have proven significant in recent hermeneutical conversations—the Christological, historical-institutional, communal, and missional. We have much to learn from each of these, and I have labored to listen attentively to what is on offer. The problem with these offerings is not that they are wrong but that when taken on their own they are insufficient. The ecclesiological deficit becomes especially apparent when we attend to the concrete practices involved in sustaining and enacting an ecclesial hermeneutic. When one dimension taken in relative isolation becomes ecclesially determinative, the practices that follow suit become over-burdened. We end up asking them to do more then they can, and in the process we portray an imbalanced account of reading. I claimed in Part One, for example, that an imbalanced emphasis on Christ’s lordly activity in revelation presses toward hermeneutical passivism and spiritualism. I argued in Part Two that an imbalanced emphasis on the church as an institution presses in the opposite direction, depicting a
church that can speak in the traditioning process but not one equipped to listen for God’s voice. In Part Three I addressed the temptation to onesidedly emphasize community-forming practices; over-realized practices attempt, in and of themselves, to generate an end that the church should rightly receive as a gift of grace. And in Part Four I suggested that hermeneutical problems arise when mission becomes a secondary or derivative step divorced from the essence of the church; when this happens, we end up with either a missional hermeneutic that can precede mission or one that must leave the church as it moves into the world.

The Unity of the Church

I suggested in the Introduction that sheer theological montage fails to do justice to the fundamental unity of Christ’s church. With Bonhoeffer’s multidimensional imagination as my guide, I have therefore attempted to depict the church as one space constituted by four interrelating relational dynamics. Ultimately, the coherence of the church derives from the selfsame consistency and coherence of Christ himself. Thus these four dimensions do not exist sequentially. Precisely because it is the *creatura verbi*, the church exists simultaneously as a historical institution, a community of togetherness, and a missionary body. Or, to put the matter differently, precisely because it exists in relationship to Christ the church also exists in relationship to its own past, to a particular place and the bodies gathered there, and to the world in and for which it has been called.

Each of the four dimensions mutually implicates and shapes the others. For this reason, I have attempted to depict the church as a synthetic whole. Rather than employing a dialectical method of analysis that must turn attention away from one strand of the church in order to attend to the others, I have attempted to weave them together. As Jesus calls the church to himself, he gives it a history and a memory, he brings bodies into proximity, and he calls the community to
participate in his ongoing work. And in order to receive and discern Jesus’ ongoing call, the church must imaginatively activate its memory, enact concrete social processes of discernment, and follow the word into the world. This movement propels the ongoing spiral of understanding. As the church in mission encounters new bodies in new places, new forms of togetherness emerge that in turn fund a renewed vision of the Lord. And so the process of following Christ—of being the church—continues.

The resurrection stories in Luke 24 have served as the imaginative stimulus for this fourfold hermeneutical joining. In them, as I noted in the Introduction, the four dimensions unite as understanding arises. I suggested that we can rightly read these stories as depictions of scriptural interpretation. These stories teach us how to read.

But they do more than this. They also sketch the contours of a nascent ecclesiology. This becomes especially apparent when we consider a key aspect of this story that has remained unmentioned to this point: for the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, understanding arises in a Eucharistic moment, in the breaking of bread. The text of Luke 24:30—“He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them”—obviously calls to mind Jesus’ institution of the Lord’s Supper in Luke 22:19. At the same time, it points ahead to the constitutive practices of the early church (cf., Acts 2:42, 46). In Luke 24, the moment of understanding is a Eucharistic moment and for just this reason is also an ecclesial moment. In this sense, I suggest we can understand the Eucharist as a concrete enactment of the ecclesiological unity I have implied in this project, as the symbolic center of the community called into being and sustained by Christ himself. At the table, we move toward Jesus (i.e., the church in relationship to Christ, Part One) as an act of remembrance (i.e., the church in relationship to its historical-institutional past, Part Two), and in so doing we bump shoulders—often literally—with those diverse others Christ has called to himself (i.e., the church in relationship
to a particular place and the bodies gathered there, Part Three). The repetition of the same formula in Luke 9:16 when Jesus feeds the 5,000—“And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples”—further suggests that this Eucharistic moment is a moment of feeding, a moment when Jesus empowers his people. As we gather around Christ with others in remembrance we are sent out to love and serve the world (i.e., the church as a missionary body, Part Four). This is especially evident in the following pericope when Jesus, as he commissions his disciples as witnesses, eats fish with them (24:42, specifically calling to mind the miraculous feeding in Luke 9). As I suggested in Part Four, this sending initiates a hermeneutical process. The disciples come to know Jesus and his kingdom precisely as they are sent in missionary movement. In this sense, the Eucharist moment is a hermeneutical moment—“their eyes were opened”—precisely as it is also a missional moment. The Eucharist’s hermeneutical power is inseparable from its missional power. The church learns to see in new ways not only when it comes to the table but also when, having been fed there, it is sent from the table into the world.

As the central liturgical practice that enacts the fourfold unity of the church, the Eucharist remains penultimate. As I have argued throughout this project, key liturgical and institutional practices facilitate an orientation of openness and susceptibility to Christ himself. The Eucharist lies at the heart of the church, in other words, because the Risen One himself calls the church into being and because it is the Risen One himself whom the church attempts to follow. Throughout this project, therefore, it has become evident that a fourfold ecclesial hermeneutic is a hermeneutic of discipleship. Reading within the church is rightly deemed “Christological”—not primarily because Christ or our ideas about him serve as a key, but because Christ is the one we pursue. As Bonhoeffer suggests, “Eliminating simple obedience [to Christ] introduces a principle of scripture foreign to the
Gospel. According to it…one must first have a key to interpreting [scripture]. But that key would not be the living Christ himself.”

This is why, as he immediately proceeds to claim, “The problem of following Christ shows itself here to be a hermeneutical problem.” To paraphrase: we come to understand within the space of discipleship, in the wake of Christ. If hermeneutics lives on the “ambiguity of otherness” as it attempts to forge understanding in the midst of difference, Bonhoeffer would have us see that this otherness is textual only in a secondary matter. Certainly, the challenge of hermeneutics as the practice of interpreting texts exists because of the text’s alterity to its readers. Yet for those seeking to live as disciples, Christ himself is the other to whom the textual other points, the utterly out-ahead one who lives in freedom and mobility. For this reason, Bonhoeffer’s famous question from prison—“Who is Jesus Christ actually for us, today?”—drives the church’s hermeneutical pursuit, propelling the community to the text time and time again.

Discipleship and Hermeneutical Space

In the wake of the living Christ, we cannot easily map, index, or police faithful interpretation. I thus join the chorus of those who have criticized highly method-driving accounts of scriptural hermeneutics. Likewise, I have provided no theory for how the distinctly textual dimensions of reading might facilitate the hermeneutical moment or for how Scripture’s regulative

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1 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 82.
2 Ibid.
3 Porter and Robinson, Hermeneutics, 4.
4 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 588.
capacity might serve its sacramental capacity. In fact, I have suggested that no such theory is possible. The movement from the penultimate hermeneutical question (what is going on in this text?) to the ultimate (who is Christ for us today?) remains an act of grace. We hear Christ only if he speaks. Though questions about how best to handle the text as a text are undoubtedly important—and the church should give the text no less care and attention than a text demands—I have directed most of my attention elsewhere, to thickly framing interpretive practices within a theological account of reading in the church. How, precisely, the community asks “Who is Christ for us today?” and how, precisely, it reads Scripture as a means of confronting him remain open questions that we cannot answer abstractly or in advance.

Implicit within this has been a critique of much of what passes as theological interpretation today. The distinctly theological nature of reading, I contend, has less to do with the actual act of handling the text than with the ends toward which this act is directed. Reading in, as, and for the church, I have therefore argued, does not require any one particular way of reading Scripture or any one particular theory for how one might garner meaning from it.

This points to the main payoff of locating the hermeneutical enterprise within ecclesial space. Rather than providing any particular method, it resources an array of practices that can sustain the process of reading Scripture faithfully. I have suggested that attending to the church’s four relational dimensions allows us to map the nature of the activity that supports and structures the act of reading within the ongoing journey of discipleship. At the heart of my argument has been the claim that the church sustains a distinct hermeneutical posture. Bonhoeffer captures this insight well: “Jesus does not deliver his word up to his listeners, so that it is misused in their rummaging
hands. Instead, he gives it to them in a way that alone retains power over them.⁵ He gives it to them without giving it away. In this sense, the fundamental asymmetry at the heart of ecclesiology carries hermeneutical implications. The asymmetry that characterizes the relationship between divine and human—between essential and empirical, christological and historical, sacramental and regulative—suggests that Scripture belongs in the church, but does not belong to it. Because Scripture belongs in the church it must be read as the church’s book, e.g., under the guidance of inherited knowledge, within a liturgical setting, and within the context of the community’s unique politic. And because Scripture ultimately belongs to Christ, it must be read Christologically. It must be read, that is, as a means of encountering him, listening for his voice, and being drawn along into walking the path he walks.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 4, 181.
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Biography

Derek William Taylor was born December 6, 1984, in Spokane, Washington. He graduated from Whitworth University in 2008 with a B.A. in Theology and Economics and a minor in Ministry Studies. In 2012 he graduated with an M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary, where he received several awards, including the Princeton Theology Fellowship (awarded by faculty to outstanding Senior Thesis) and the Archibald Alexander Hodge Prize in Systematic Theology. In 2012 he began pursuing a Th.D. at Duke University, where his studies were funded by the Duke Divinity School Th.D. Fellowship.


He currently holds a position at Hope College in Holland, MI, where he serves as the Director of the Emmaus Scholars Program, an intentional Christian community that helps undergraduate college students incorporate faith, justice, and vocation. At Hope College he also serves as a Visiting Professor in Christian Ministry and Religion. He and his wife Lauren have one son, Theodore Steven.