

Probing the Will of God: Bonhoeffer and Discernment

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Abstract: Like the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, the spiritual discernment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer seeks to bring one's life into conformity (*Gleichgestaltung*) with Christ. Such conformation makes discipleship costly; but it also overflows with the fullness of life.

Key Terms: Bonhoeffer; discernment; discipleship.

Today, as I begin writing this article, is the feast day of St. Ignatius, July 31. As a Lutheran, I might have overlooked this feast (it's not in the *LBW* calendar), but a Jesuit friend reminds me of the day and celebrates it with Christians around the world in honor of the 16th century Spaniard. Among other things, Ignatius of Loyola was an extraordinarily gifted spiritual director whose sensitivity to the movements of the human and divine spirit bears continuing fruit in the *Spiritual Exercises* he developed, still in widespread use today.¹ In these *Exercises* Ignatius provides a dynamic framework for the spiritual director guiding directees in a 30-day retreat. This structured retreat is centered in the movement through the paschal experience of Jesus Christ and in the directee's discernment of his or her own authentic vocation in response to the love and gifts of Christ. Although Ignatius himself would not have used this language in this way, his *Exercises* provide a creative, powerful tool bridging for retreatants the gap between religion and spirituality. In other words, Ignatius structures the resources of the religion—the vast and potentially remote-seeming biblical, liturgical, moral, theological, and devotional traditions of the church—in such a way as to allow them to come to life in the prayerful personal experience of the retreatants, that is, in their spirituality.²

At the heart of this mediating role is the *Exercises'* centering in the practice of discernment. That is, what mediates between religion and spirituality is the dis-

cernment of the “for me” or “for us” central also to Lutheran experience, or that which brings religious truths (Word of God) to life in particular personal or historical circumstances (Word of God *pro me, pro nobis*). Martin Luther thus distinguished the Bible as text, full of historical and theological assertions, from the living Word of God encountering the hearer or reader through that text.³ “God must say to you in your heart that this Word is God's Word, otherwise it is uncertain. Even if you had all the wisdom of the whole of Scripture, and all reason, yet if what is said here did not come or was not sent from God it would be nothing at all.”⁴ The task of interpretation, then, is to discern that living Word, by the power of the Holy Spirit, for new listeners and contexts. In more recent years, Dietrich Bonhoeffer similarly sought to discern the *pro me/pro nobis* of faith: the question that haunted him at the end of his life, writing from his Nazi prison cell, was not so much, “Who is Jesus Christ?” (a religious question) as “Who is Jesus Christ *for us today?*”⁵

Yet for all the contemporary insistence in many quarters that religion is outdated and spirituality alone worth our attention, note that in fact none of these spiritualities—Ignatius', Luther's, or Bonhoeffer's—makes any sense on its own, without the religion it animates. Without the biblical and traditional imagery that both frames and is the very stuff of the *Exercises*, there can be no living encounter with the crucified and risen One. Without the Scriptures themselves,

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and the church's long history of engagement with them as living Word, there can be no *verbum pro me*. And without the person of Jesus Christ encountered in Word and sacrament and centuries of prayer and christological reflection, there can be no way of discerning who Christ is for us today, let alone being united to his death and resurrection and drawn ever more fully into living relationship with him. In the apt metaphor developed by Sandra Schneiders to illumine this question, the relation between religion and spirituality is analogous to that between body and spirit: neither can exist, let alone work and play and love in the world, apart from the other.⁶ We need both for a living church: I am asserting that what makes creative and mutually nourishing relationship possible between religion and spirituality is specifically the practice of discernment.

Discernment in Bonhoeffer

In this article I will provide a brief overview of discernment in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as a recent thinker whose contributions in this area are important for our time. I believe that a large measure of the alienation some people experience from the church, fueling a search for alternative "spiritualities," derives from their never having been taught the art of discernment, i.e., how to read and explore and mine their religious tradition with an ear open for where the Spirit is moving for them through these riches.

Quite a range of approaches to discernment has developed within Christianity, from the Ignatian branch of Roman Catholicism to the clearness committees of the Quaker tradition.⁷ In contrast to these comprehensive resources, developed and refined over time, Bonhoeffer's explicit focus on discernment emerged only late in his writings, and he never had a chance to reflect systematically on the significance or practice of discernment for his spirituality. Nevertheless a careful look at his writings reveals important resources on several levels for a contemporary and distinctively Lutheran approach to discernment, an approach which can perhaps assist Christians today in their attempts to trace living spiritual meaning within their own religious traditions.⁸ Perhaps most signifi-

cantly of all, Bonhoeffer models a Christian life centered in ongoing, clear-sighted discernment in the midst of complex and ambiguous historical circumstances. His witness therefore demonstrates the tremendous power for good which can flow through a life well skilled in Christian discernment—as well as the risky courage in faithfulness into which its sustained practice draws a person.

In sketching Bonhoeffer's approach to discernment, I will begin with the fundamental anchor of his theology and spirituality, namely the role and place of Jesus Christ as the reality of all that is, in all particularity and concreteness. Next I will look at some of the ways Bonhoeffer speaks explicitly about the discernment of this reality that is Jesus Christ, and how this discerned reality takes shape in Christian lives. Finally, I will conclude with the suggestion of a distinctively "Bonhoefferian" contribution to the Christian language and imagery of discernment.

The Reality of God; The Reality of the World

In Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, he posits Christ as the reality of both God and the world, the one in whom both God and world are truly known. Notions of the world *or* of God which attempt to consider these in separation from one another, without taking full account of the other and of their union in Christ, are "abstractions."⁹ And the only truly "concrete" or accurate grasp of reality is that which begins with Jesus Christ, who reveals both the heart of God's redemptive desire and the stark and beautiful reality of the divinely encompassed world just as it is:

In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and in the reality of the world, but not in the one without the other. The reality of God discloses itself only by setting me entirely in the reality of the world, and when I encounter the reality of the world it is always already sustained, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. ... [The purpose of Christian life] is, therefore, participation in the reality of God and of the world in Jesus Christ today, and this participation

must be such that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, or the reality of the world without the reality of God.¹⁰

In Christ one need not flee the reality of either God or the world but can truly perceive both only in their necessary and inseparable interconnection. This clarity of vision gives rise to capacities for compassion, for embrace of the real, and for responsible action in the world grounded in a lucid perception of what is. Thus Bonhoeffer names “correspondence with reality” as one of the touchstones of responsible ethical action.¹¹ Because of Jesus Christ, Christians need not fear reality but in their movement deeper into Christ are invited ever more deeply into all that is: God and world, *one* reality.¹²

Concrete Spirituality

Thus an authentically Christian spirituality, for Bonhoeffer, is necessarily highly concrete. The interconnections between God and world which for him define “concreteness” are manifested always and only in the particular. Already in his dissertation, Bonhoeffer’s critique of German idealism was rooted in just such a focus on the particular over against any sorts of universal principles. And this suspicion of abstract truths and generalizations continues to characterize his thinking throughout his life.¹³ For Bonhoeffer, what is most real is what is most particular—a given person, or situation, or context—precisely in its uniqueness, not only its continuity with or “generalizability” from other persons, situations, or contexts. And thus for him the will of God as well is highly concrete, reflecting the well-discerned and inseparable realities of God and world as those converge in highly particular, never predictable ways in any given circumstance, for any given person or community. In order to gain a true understanding of reality, i.e., of Jesus Christ as he truly is, one must be open to perceiving the world itself as it truly is in all its alterity, and must respect its diversity and otherness on its own terms from the outset.¹⁴

Because the will of God, or the “good,” thus cannot ever be defined in advance by means of general theological, ethical, or spiritual principles, Bonhoeffer’s lifelong emphasis on concreteness necessarily fosters a spirituality radically dependent on discernment, practiced anew in every new situation. This is implicit throughout his life but becomes much more explicit in the years he spends in the conspiracy against Hitler, where a reliance upon mature discernment makes possible ventures of public responsibility which would have seemed incredible to him in earlier years of his life. In his primary explication of discernment, which he terms *Prüfung* (that is, “probing” or “examining” of the will of God), he writes in his *Ethics*,

The will of God is not a system of rules which is established from the outset; it is something new and different in each different situation in life. ... The heart, the understanding, observation, and experience must all collaborate in this task. ... our knowledge of God’s will is not something over which we ourselves dispose, but it depends solely on the grace of God, and this grace is and requires to be new every morning. That is why this matter of probing ... the will of God is so serious a matter.¹⁵

Involving focused attention on one’s diverse intellectual, emotional, and spiritual intuitions as these “collaborate” in the prayerful sifting of experience and observation, discernment clearly requires a high degree of self-awareness as well as the simultaneous capacity for attunement to the fluid, shifting movements of the grace of God. Because discernment means accurate perception of reality, it is inextricably tied to the One who for Bonhoeffer *is* the reality of both God and the world, namely Jesus Christ. Ultimately then Christian discernment means learning to perceive the real as that which is *revealed by and in Jesus*, and as his call opens to us our particular vocation in every new day, every new concrete situation. “Only upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, only within the space which is defined by Jesus Christ, only ‘in’ Jesus Christ can one probe what the will of God is.”¹⁶ Probing the will and vocation of God requires Christians to live as fully as possible within reality, i.e., in Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Disciplines

This means that an important aspect of the practice of discernment for Bonhoeffer is what we today often refer to as spiritual disciplines, namely sustained and extended meditation on the Word; prayer and intercession; mutual confession, spiritual direction, and the Lord's Supper.¹⁷ All these practices form us over time in learning to live in this space Christ creates for us: to pay attention to where and how he reveals himself to us, to learn to distinguish his voice from others' voices and remain within earshot, to turn toward him and not be distracted by competing demands, etc. In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer outlined the contours and implications of such a radical spiritual orientation to Jesus Christ. The center of discipleship for him is *Bindung an Jesus*, i.e., "attachment to Jesus," a life spent growing in the perceived clarity of Jesus' call, gaze, and touch. Listening for his voice, keeping our eyes centered on him, staying in touch with him—this is *Bindung an Jesus*, a relationship of tremendous intimacy sustained by love. Bonhoeffer states repeatedly that there is no "program" or agenda apart from this: the only call of the disciple is proximity to Jesus, to commit oneself to him and remain with him wherever he leads.

[Discipleship] is nothing other than being bound to Jesus Christ [*Bindung an Jesus Christus*] alone. This means completely breaking through anything preprogrammed, idealistic, or legalistic. No further content is possible because Jesus is the only content. There is no other content besides Jesus. He himself is it. So the call to discipleship is a commitment [*Bindung*] solely to the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁸

By the spiritual disciplines of attunement to Jesus' call, gaze, and touch, disciples learn over time to discern reality: to let the One who is the reality of God and world lead them deeper into each. Needless to say, this process is by no means simple or automatic. To learn, given one's own human limitations and sinfulness and the profound complexity of the human psyche, to recognize and obey the voice of Jesus Christ

can be a daunting process indeed; this is why faithfully practiced spiritual disciplines of attentive listening to the Word are so essential.

Give Up on Being Good

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

Those who wish to take up the problem of a Christian ethic must be confronted at once with a demand which is quite without parallel. They must from the outset discard as irrelevant the two questions which alone impel them to concern themselves with the problem of ethics, 'How can I be good?' and 'How can I do good?,' and instead of these they must ask the utterly and totally different question, 'What is the will of God?'¹⁹

Further, he describes the attempt to categorize reality into moral spheres as the primal temptation itself. This is the voice of the serpent promising, "you shall be like God" precisely in knowledge of good and evil. The role of Christian ethics and reflection is not to place such labels on ourselves, one another, or aspects of reality itself according to some abstract system of evaluation. Rather than judgment, the faithful Christian stance is one of discernment and obedience to the voice of Christ who alone reveals what is real, and who himself is the content of the good.²⁰ This frees the Christian from both arrogation to oneself of the divine capacity for judgment and slavish subservience to social, religious, or self-imposed rules and moral systems.

Christ Replaces Knowledge of Good and Evil

In his explication of discernment, Bonhoeffer thus not only asserts that one can discern the will of God “only within the space which is defined by Jesus Christ,” as noted above, but he now defines that “space” more clearly. That is, Christ himself “occupies within us exactly that space which was previously occupied by our own knowledge of good and evil.”²¹ Thus for Bonhoeffer “the space which is defined by Jesus Christ” is his image for the relinquishing of *a priori* categories of evaluation of oneself or others and letting reality be defined for us by the living voice of Christ. In his *Ethics* he does not give this new space any more content than this, defining it here primarily negatively, i.e., in relinquishing of judgment. But in a lovely essay written in the same period, he seems to be proposing gratitude as a positive criterion of discernment. He writes,

That for which I can thank God is good. That for which I cannot thank God is evil. And the determination whether I can thank God for something or not is discerned in Jesus Christ and his Word. Jesus Christ is the boundary of gratitude. Jesus Christ is also the fullness of gratitude; in him gratitude knows no bounds. It encompasses all gifts of the created world. It embraces even pain and suffering. It penetrates the deepest darkness until it has found within it the love of God in Jesus Christ. ... Gratitude is even able to encompass past sin and to say yes to it, because in it God's grace is revealed—*O felix culpa* (Romans 6:17).²²

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

habitual human tendency toward placing categories on reality: “good” or “evil.”

To summarize, then, the writings and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer provide clear testimony to the significance of discernment for the faithful unfolding of Christian life in the world. Indeed, toward the end of his life Bonhoeffer comes to speak of the goal of this entire process as not simply discipleship (*Nachfolge*, the “following after”) of Christ but outright conformation (*Gleichgestaltung*) with him.²³ The spiritual discipline of meditation on the Word, alone and in community, for oneself in all personal depth and in light of the world's enormous needs, gradually draws persons into conformation with the living Word at the heart of reality.

Although saturated with intimacy, love, and gratitude, this is by no means of course a painless process; the discernment of the living Word in community reveals also our sins and shortcomings forgiven only as we repent of them before God and others in concrete confession.²⁴ And conformation with a crucified God means that disciples are drawn into risky solidarity with the world's crucified ones as well. It may mean therefore a death sentence at the hands of the Nazis; but through it all, discernment of the presence, form, and call of Jesus Christ in the world is, for Bonhoeffer, a love affair with life in all its fullness and reality. Further, to return to the terms used at the beginning of this article, his capacity for uniquely clear and attentive discernment shaped the truths of religion into a living and transformative spirituality—a spirituality which in turn subsequently nourishes, critiques, and vivifies the religion itself for new generations of believers. The capacity for discernment Bonhoeffer develops thus works not only to mediate religion into a living spirituality but in reverse as well, as he uses religious claims (e.g., Jesus Christ as the criterion of reality) to adjudicate the authenticity of various competing “spiritualities” of his day and to reject those, such as Nazi ideology, which violate fundamental Christian religious truth. Thus the capacity for discernment functions to mediate between religion and spirituality in both directions, as believers receive living spiritual truth from religious tradition, and as they use religious criteria in turn to probe the adequacy of any given spirituality.

A Polyphony of Love for the Created World

I will close with a uniquely “Bonhoefferian” image of the discernment which marked his life. Far from being obsessively focused solely on the “cost” of discipleship, his whole life a stoic journey toward martyrdom, Bonhoeffer in fact loved and celebrated the created world in many dimensions throughout his life. One especially significant aspect of life in all its fullness for him was music: his family and friends made music often, eagerly, for hours on end. Bonhoeffer himself was an extremely gifted pianist, and his love of hymns and music comes through clearly in his prison letters, where remembered favorite stanzas or overheard radio broadcasts evoke profound depths of comfort, grief, or joy. He often quotes deeply loved poetic lines from hymns and even sketches out musical notations to remind his readers of a piece he has in mind.²⁵

Thus it is not surprising, perhaps, that an image Bonhoeffer develops to evoke the fullness of life into which the resurrection of Jesus Christ bears us is that of polyphony. Reflecting in delight on the sensuality and passion of the Song of Songs, and on the Hebrew Scriptures’ great and utterly unrestrained love of this-worldly life in general, he makes use of this musical metaphor to describe the ways he sees all our loves, all our fully “secular” passions and vocations, taking their place in relation to God as *cantus firmus*:

God wants us to love [God] eternally with our whole hearts—not in such a way as to injure or weaken our earthly love, but to provide a kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. ... Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and plain, the counterpoint can be developed to its limits. The two are ‘undivided and yet distinct,’ ... like Christ in his divine and human natures. May not the attraction and importance of polyphony in music consist in its being a musical reflection of this Christological fact and therefore of our *vita christiana*?²⁶

This image emerges from the very center of a Lutheran spirituality profoundly nourished over cen-

turies, from Luther to Bach to Distler, by hymns and their musical settings. For Bonhoeffer, the image of polyphony evokes our participation in Christ whose resurrection draws us into the heart of the world, and whose own being in us is that *cantus firmus* in relation to whom our lives’ own “counterpoint has a firm support and can’t come adrift or get out of tune, while yet remaining a distinct whole in its own right.”²⁷ In his initial letter the metaphor of polyphony first serves as a means of comforting his friend Eberhard Bethge who was about to return to the front lines (“rely on the *cantus firmus*!”); it then re-emerges in Bonhoeffer’s prayer and in later letters as well, gradually coming to describe his joy in the multi-dimensionality and secure rootedness of faith.²⁸ Just as each contrapuntal line has its own relative independence and musical integrity even as it resounds over against other lines and the *cantus firmus* itself in surprising, hidden, or revelatory ways, so too the various aspects of our lives in the world take on their true significance only in their ultimate relation to the One “firmly sung” by God, namely Jesus Christ.

To listen for the *cantus firmus* among all the other complementary or distracting melodies of our experience in this complex world—this is discernment. Bonhoeffer’s legacy gives us important clues not only as to how such attentive listening takes place in Christian life but also of the soaring beauty of a life firmly anchored in the *cantus firmus* even in the midst of grave threat. This is, I believe, a lovely and authentically Lutheran image of the discernment at the heart of Christian faith.

Endnotes

1. See for instance the version provided, with notes and introduction, in the Classics of Western Spirituality series: “The Spiritual Exercises,” trans. George E. Ganss, S. J., in *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss, S. J., et al. (New York, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1991), 113-214.

2. Many recent works have attempted definitions of the terms “religion” and “spirituality” to highlight their differences or relationship. In a recent lecture entitled, “Religion and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?,” *The Santa Clara Lectures 6/2* (February 6, 2000), Sandra Schneiders offers the following definitions, among others. Religion is “a spiritual tradition ... that has given rise to a characteristic way of understanding and living in the presence of the numinous” (7). This characteristic mode of presence toward ultimate reality is institutionalized within “cultural systems ... organized in particular patterns of creed,

code, and cult" (8). Spirituality, in the sense I am using it, is the specifically experiential and personally or communally appropriative dimension of a given religious tradition. In Christian terms, it refers to the action of the Holy Spirit drawing believers into the life and Body of Christ, in and for the world (cf. Schneiders, 3-6), and to believers' concrete experience of and participation in this work of the Spirit in their lives.

3. As is well known, Luther insisted that the foundational principle of biblical or indeed any ecclesial authority is not the decrees of councils, popes, or theologians, but *was Christum treibt*: what conveys Christ as the living Word of God (cf., e.g., "Prefaces to the Books of the Bible," *LW* 35:396). Listening for *was Christum treibt* is the process of discernment, i.e., moving prayerfully, consciously, and responsibly between religious texts and a living spirituality encountering new context and struggles. Cf. Robert J. Goesser, "The Doctrine of Word and Scripture in Luther and Lutheranism," in *The Report of the Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue Second Series 1976-1980* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 1981).

4. Martin Luther, cited in Joseph Sittler, *The Doctrine of the Word in the Structure of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: ULCA Board of Publication, 1948), 25. Sittler notes also, "just as the eye of faith must pierce through the Galilean rabbi, the poor man of Nazareth, to lay hold of the God-man—just so the spirit-given, discerning eye of faith must pierce through, unmask the incognito of a historical document and hear there the Word of God" (33f.).

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, new greatly enlarged edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller et al. (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 279. Hereafter referred to as *LPP*.

6. Schneiders, "Religion and Spirituality," 19.

7. On discernment within the Jesuit tradition, see, e.g., Michael J. Buckley, "The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits," in *Spiritual Exercises: Collected Essays*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (London: SPCK, 1990); John Carroll Futrell, "Ignatian Discernment," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol. 2, no. 2 (St. Louis: American Assistance Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality, 1969). For Quaker resources, see, e.g., *Friends Consultation on Discernment* (Richmond, IN: Quaker Hill Conference Center, 1985), and Michael J. Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983).

8. Bonhoeffer himself wrestled with the inadequacy of "religion" toward the end of his life (cf. in *LPP* the series of theological letters beginning on April 30, 1944). Although he does not use the language of this contemporary debate, perhaps his fascination with "non-religious interpretation" of Christian truth is his own attempt to discern a more adequate spirituality for his time. Yet, far from in fact being a repudiation of "religious" realities like the Bible, the church, sacraments, worship, and prayer, Bonhoeffer is attempting to liberate them from unworkable past accretions— from, perhaps, the stifling residues of spiritualities long dead.

9. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Touchstone/Macmillan, 1955), 187ff. For Bonhoeffer's understandings of "concreteness" and "abstraction," see Mark Brocker, *The Community of God, Jesus Christ, and Responsibility: The Responsible Person and the Responsible Community in Bonhoeffer's Ethics* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1992), 199ff.

10. *Ethics*, 193.

11. *Ibid.*, 224-32.

12. *Ibid.*, 193ff, esp. 195.

13. Note that, for instance, his well-known critique of "cheap grace" is formulated as precisely an attack on "grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. ... forgiveness of sins as a general truth." As such, it is the "denial of God's living word, denial of the incarnation of the word of God." Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, German eds., Martin Kuske and Ilse

Tödt, English eds., Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, *DBWE* 4, gen. ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 43; cf. also 53.

14. All this emphasis on concreteness and particularity could open Bonhoeffer to charges of relativism, of envisioning a universe in which there are no ultimate truths, but always only merely conditional or provisional ones, different for each individual, shifting over time or in different relational or historical settings—a world unable to hear the Word of God as that echoes through the centuries from an impossibly alien time and place. How then does the concrete relate to the universal? On this see his extensive treatment of the relation of the ultimate to the penultimate (*Ethics*, 120-85). In brief, he correlates the realm of the ultimate with *justification* and that of the penultimate with *sanctification*. The justifying Word of God in which (or whom) we and the world are created, named, loved, redeemed, and borne desires always to be made flesh in the penultimate realm of time and space. Without its concrete embodiment in the penultimate (sanctification), it remains an abstraction; yet without that ultimate vision (justification), there is no hope or animation for the penultimate realm on its own. To merely expect people to break free by themselves, without the Word of grace, is condemning and despairing law, while to preach merely ultimate vision without its concrete embodiment in real situations of brokenness is cheap grace and an abandonment of people to their misery in real life.

15. *Ethics*, 41. Translation slightly altered: "probing" in place of "proving."

16. *Ibid.*, 42.

17. Bonhoeffer explores the significance of these spiritual disciplines in chapters 2-5 of *Life Together* (he does not use the language of "spiritual direction," but speaks in broader ways of the profound significance of relationships of intentional and Spirit-guided listening). Also, it is in *Life Together* that Bonhoeffer speaks most clearly of the importance of daily meditation on "God's Word for me personally." Cf. *Life Together*, German eds., Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr, English ed., Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtress, *DBWE* 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 87ff. Hereafter referred to as *LT*.

18. *Discipleship*, 59.

19. *Ethics*, 186. In the recent *DBW* edition, the order of the sections has been reworked: here, these lines from "Christ, Reality, and the Good" open the whole book. Cf. *DBW* 6: 31.

20. He develops this insistence on the priority of discernment of the actual will of God, as opposed to judgment according to schemes of good vs. evil, especially in his section on "Correspondence with Reality," *Ethics*, 224-32.

21. *Ibid.*, 45.

22. "On the Gratitude of the Christian," *DBW* 16: 491, my translation.

23. Cf. *Ethics*, 81-86.

24. Cf. *LT* on confession, 108-16.

25. See, for instance, *LPP*, 148, 170, 240. Places where he mentions the importance of hymns (often the hymns of Paul Gerhardt) for him in prison include *LPP*, 22, 27, 40, 53, 128, 136, 148, 170, 207, 219, 240, 272, 308 (note 33), 369, 375 (note 8).

26. *Ibid.*, 303. In musical terms, the *cantus firmus*, literally "firm/solid song," refers to a melody (usually a hymn melody, carrying the consciously or unconsciously evoked resonances of that hymn's texts as well) used as the basis of a complex composition in many voices. The earliest polyphonous compositions tended to have the *cantus firmus* in the tenor voice, but by the Baroque period composers experimented with putting this central harmonic line in all different voices. For organ compositions, very often the pedal line came to take the *cantus firmus*, whereas many choral cantata arrangements gave the melody to the

sopranos. Regardless of the particular voice expressing it, however, in all cases the *cantus firmus* functions as the harmonic center of the composition, that in relation to which all the other voices take their places. This is the sense in which Bonhoeffer is using the metaphor. For more information on *cantus firmus* and polyphony see, e.g., *Harvard*

Dictionary of Music, ed. Willi Apel, revised and enlarged second edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

27. *LPP*, 303.

28. See *LPP*, 305, 311, 318.

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