The Authority To Be (Culpably) Inclusive: A Mark of Bonhoeffer's Confessio

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1. Preview

A. Entitled To Be Tainted

Previously I had occasion to write about Bonhoeffer's exclusiveness. (l) Really it was God s exclusiveness, as Bonhoeffer witnessed it. But that was only the first shoe. With this follow-up essay I hope to drop the second shoe, Bonhoeffer's (God's) inclusiveness. As we might expect, inclusion will win out over exclusion, mercy over wrath. But Bonhoeffer's God being what God is, in Jesus Christ, there is something else we should expect: the divine inclusion will supersede the divine exclusion not at all cheaply, not like a predictable TV happy ending, but at an exorbitant price both to Christ and to his followers. The way he and they include outsiders, the kind of outsiders they include, is costly in the extreme. The wonder will be: like Christ, his followers construe their including of outsiders, even the most suspect, as a privilege. It is something for which they believe themselves "astonishingly" authorized.

Few people will believe this about them, even about Bonhoeffer. Many, including his admirers today, will be embarrassed by such

indiscriminate inclusiveness. Embarrassed? Yes, and understandably. In order for a Bonhoeffer to be as embarrassingly inclusive as he was, he would have needed an authority which supercedes the very authority of God, that is, any God with standards, any discriminating God. It was one thing for Bonhoeffer to identify with those who suffered innocently. For that he is almost universally admired. But for him to identify with those who suffered deservedly, those whom even we may have grave questions about, and for him to take sides with them against the likes of us, for him to refuse to let us make excuses for him and to insist instead on consorting with the guilty—that is something else. That makes him, along with the dubious company he kept, an object of embarrassment, all the moreso when he acts as if we're entitled to our embarrassment.

As we warned, for the followers of Christ to claim such a higher, prior, apparently promiscuous authority incurs a cost. It incurs for themselves, right within their own circles, the suspicion of betrayal and, with that, their being excluded all over again, this time closer to home. The trick is for them to suffer that exclusion with a minimum of regret, confident of their authority to do so, seeing in whose name they do it.

B) Bonhoeffer On Luther's Two Kingdoms

From even this much of a preview, with its hint of two conflicting divine authorities the canny reader may have detected a suspicious echo of Martin Luther, specifically Luther's theology of "two kingdoms." The more's the wonder, since that is the very theme in Luther s theology which had become most controversial, most stigmatized in Bonhoeffer's own embattled church situation. All the same, never one to shrink from controversy, Bonhoeffer made an explicit point of reasserting that provocative Lutheran Reformation accent for the churches' new, quite different plight in the twentieth century.

To do so Bonhoeffer not only had to oppose the old Pseudoluthertum with its statist partitioning of God's two kingdoms, state from church, into separate zones or "spaces." Also he had to contend more and more with those Barthian "Enthusiasts" in his own Confessing Church who in reaction to the "so-called Lutherans" relapsed, zig for zag, into a church-dominant theocracy. Worst of all perhaps was that mainline Protestantism in the USA where Bonhoeffer found Luther's distinction virtually non-existent, a church uncritically assimilated to its culture. Up against such entrenched reaction all around, Luther's reformist theology of two kingdoms was not apt to persuade (nor is it today) even with an advocate as articulate as Bonhoeffer. But then, of course, I could be wrong. The test would be, as Bonhoeffer learned, Are there still among us such sacrificial confessors who will pay what it costs to overcome God's exclusiveness, namely, to bear that exclusion themselves under the expansive cross of Christ? For the more expansive it is, the more expensive.

That hard-won superseding of one divine kingdom by another, always and only via the Cross, is what we have called the reprioritizing of authorities. It is the supplanting of God's exclusionary authority by means of a contrary, superior authority, namely, God's authority to include. It means, in short, including the very ones whom God, the same God has excluded. How to do that without blasphemy, without simply negating one divine authority—cheapening it, de-Authorizing it—by means of another, more convenient to ourselves? Answer: by still giving the old, condemnatory authority its full due yet without granting it the last Word. It is the analogy of demotion: God's critical Law, which is still very much God's, is demoted to "penultimate" (vorletzt, Bonhoeffer calls it) by comparison with God's forgiveness, which is "ultimate" (letzt).

It is the patristic metaphor of an ambidextrous God, whose

authority to reject is only his “left hand” but whose “right hand,” which he favors, is compassion. And no wonder, for at the right hand sits the beloved Son. Yet he, remember, gained that upper hand only through suffering the world’s sin in his own body on the tree. That is still The Way by which his disciples trump exclusion with inclusion, by their co-suffering with Christ the world’s sin and sinners—to the death if need be, even at the risk of appearing irreligious, and all as if they had the right.

C) A Time For Confessing

It is in some such way as this, I hope to show, that Bonhoeffer quite intentionally retrieved for his own time Luther’s theology of two kingdoms, namely, not just by

distinguishing their two-ness—that, too-but then by reprioritizing them: reasserting the distinctiveness of God’s gospel over God’s Law yet without discrediting the Law in the process. That is one of the most crying needs in a time like Bonhoeffer’s. And what time was that? It was a time like that of his confessional predecessors in the sixteenth century. They had called theirs “a time for confession.”

The term occurs in the Lutheran confessional book, Formula of Concord. That document, as Eberhard Bethge recalled, had become a consuming preoccupation for Bonhoeffer and his seminarians at Finkenwalde. “A time for confession,” indeed. What else but that, a status confessionis, a witness-stand, was their own threatening situation! What it called for was not just some act of confessing, however fearless in its martyrdom, but a confessio, a contrary truth claim, a sharp articulation of the faith, a painfully explicit message. For that was exactly what was being threatened, the church’s message. And by what? By

“heresy,” not just by tyranny but heresy. The “German Christians” were inverting God’s authorities, state over church, Law over gospel. These inverted authorities now had to be reversed. Bonhoeffer branded this heresy “legalism.” For though it mimics Law as well as gospel, it in fact destroys them both and therewith the church altogether. Under the circumstance that heresy could be countered in no other way than by a most outspoken witness in deed and Word. It was that kind of “time.”

D) Lutheranizing Barmen

Come to think of it, wasn’t that clearly what the Barmen Declaration had been doing, topping exclusion with inclusion? Clearly? Well, yes and no. No, not so clearly, if we heed the Lutheran critics of Barmen. Though most of them eventually supported the Declaration, more or less, they still complained how Barthian it was, particularly how its first two articles had confused, not clarified, the difference between God’s two kingdoms. They had a point. Yet on the other hand, yes, Barmen did deal unmistakably with these two contraries, God’s rejecting and God’s reclaiming. Right in the Declaration’s first two articles, doesn’t it emphasize, first, how exclusive is the Word of God but then, next and contrariwise, how uniquely inclusive? In fact, who are the offenders whom Article One excludes? Isn’t it precisely those rival totalitarian authorities which arrogate to themselves an all-inclusiveness for which, as Article Two insists, Jesus Christ holds the monopoly?

Isn’t that in effect what Luther saw the two kingdoms doing, Law and gospel in their sociological effect: God ruling who’s out and who’s in, peccatores and iusti, accusing and forgiving, putting to death and resurrecting, excluding and including? Well, candidly, that may be reading Barmen with a Lutheran spin. Exactly. And that, as I hope to show, is what Bonhoeffer was doing both in deed and Word.

Recall how the delegates at Barmen, despite their unanimous approval of the Declaration, still acknowledged the deep intra-confessional differences which divided them, Lutheran and Reformed and Union. Recall also how they declared their good intention, once they returned to their home churches, to provide "responsible interpretations" of the Declaration each from their respective traditions. Recall how the Lutherans, for all their criticism, by and large failed to come up with such a "responsible interpretation." Recall how Bonhoeffer, beginning with his ministry in Pomerania, found himself in a quandary there. He was surrounded by Lutherans as committed as he was to the Confessing Church but who yet were critical of Barmen, which he was not. Still, they were critical of Barmen because they were confessional Lutherans, which he too insisted on being. So, how to be both a Barmenite and a Lutheran?

E) The All-inclusive Authorizer

We shall recall especially, in the pages which follow, how Bonhoeffer at last accomplished an explicitly confessional witness, maybe even a Lutheran one, in his reprioritizing the authorities. Where and when shall we look for that? Answer: to his years in the conspiracy, his second return from America, his imprisonment and execution. And all thanks to his "most astonishing experience," as vivid a spiritual and theological breakthrough as Luther's own "tower experience." This will entail some re-reading of Bonhoeffer's posthumous Ethics and of his Letters and Papers From Prison but also, as if by second sight, some "aha" recollections of his earliest theological themes. None of these writings of course will score the confessional point, the reprioritizing of God's authorities, except as an exegesis of Bonhoeffer's actual suffering and death.

"Suffering and death": does that sound sacrilegious, to

characterize Bonhoeffer's witness with words usually reserved for Christ alone? That is a hazard, I admit. Yet evidently that is the only way the reprioritizing of authorities can be brought about by sinners like ourselves, at least in "a time for confession," whether the confessors in question die violently, as Jesus did, or in their beds. Either way, it is a martyrological fact that the Creator's authorities are restored to their own respective ultimacy/penultimacy only when confessors who claim to include those whom God excludes pay the price for their shameful inclusiveness, the price which the same God first paid in Christ for them all.

Does Bonhoeffer's explication of his "experience" qualify as a "responsible interpretation" of Barmen or, for that matter, of Luther's theology of two kingdoms? In both cases I freely give Bonhoeffer the benefit of the doubt. (In this case isn't it rather the benefit of the faith?) At the least, I find it impossible any longer to think of Luther's theology of two kingdoms without thinking of Bonhoeffer's in the same breath, now that both are before us. Finally, though, neither Bonhoeffer nor Luther is the One whom we associate with the reprioritizing of authorities. Nor did they.

2. Bonhoeffer's "Experience": How The Excluded Came To Be Included

A) Bonhoeffer's Exclusiveness Reviewed

As I mentioned before, the writing which preceded this one concentrated on Bonhoeffer's God's exclusiveness. That much, we found, reflected the exclusiveness of the Barmen Declaration, even outdid it. So far, then, Bonhoeffer's theology and life seemed to provide the Declaration with a "responsible interpretation," maybe a Lutheran one. Yet being left with only

that much, exclusiveness, was disappointing. In the end we were left wondering, Surely there is more to Bonhoeffer's "responsible interpretation" of Barmen than his door-slamming disclaimer, "Whoever knowingly separates himself from the Confessing Church in Germany separates himself from salvation." We tried exonerating Bonhoeffer from sounding so negative. We reminded ourselves, as Bonhoeffer himself had done, that the real separatists were those who separated themselves, those who set limits to the church from outside, not from inside. That is why, from that "alien" distance, they heard merely the church's Law, not its gospel. Still, we had to admit that the Law which they heard, which confirmed their self-separation, was God's Law, not just Bonhoeffer's. No one knew that, and sweated it, more than he.

Again with all good intentions, we reminded ourselves that for Bonhoeffer to equate the Christian church in Germany with just "the Confessing Church" only reflected what for him was axiomatic, namely, that God's Word for the church is always "concrete," historically situated, never abstract or vague. So then why, we pleaded in his defense, perhaps a bit desperately, shouldn't the church likewise be concrete, not some church in general but this church, in this Germany, with just these confessors? Yet we knew all along that by the same token whoever "separates himself from the Confessing Church and thus "from salvation" must likewise be a concrete, historically situated, never abstract or vague human being. Even separatists are concrete. So, for all our efforts to put Bonhoeffer in the best possible light, the reader could probably detect between the lines our own uneasiness about Bonhoeffer's exclusivenss. Through it all we too were asking, Doesn't Bonhoeffer's confessio let alone his interpretation of Barmen, somewhere somehow provide a church-world relation which is not just exclusive but also inclusive? And now at last we can announce,

Indeed it does.

B) Bonhoeffer's "Most Astonishing Experience"

In fact, for Bonhoeffer Christ's claim upon the world is inclusive, "total" (ganz) exactly because it is "exclusive" (ausschliesslich.) This paradox, I grant, sounds a bit abrupt. It will require some unpacking. To explain this dialectical claim of Christ Bonhoeffer refers autobiographically to "one of our most astonishing experiences during the years [under Nazism] when everything Christian was sorely oppressed." So formative must this "experience" have been—Bonhoeffer calls it "an experience of our days," "an actual concrete experience," a "living experience"—that the reader is reminded of Luther's Turmerlebnis. True, the experience did confirm Jesus' words of "Law," that "Whoever is not with me is against me" (Mt. 12:30). That much is exclusive. But the same experience soon confirmed the amazing contrary as well, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mk. 9:40). That is inclusive in the extreme, and the church has Jesus' authorization for that.

The experience, Bonhoeffer recollects, had begun some years earlier, with the "confessing congregations" and with their "exclusive demand for a clear profession of allegiance to Christ." The exclusiveness of their demand, as we saw, was directed not just against the "anti-Christian forces" of Nazism, which actually had had the effect of driving the confessing congregations together in the first place. No, "the greatest of all the dangers which threatened the Church with inner disintegration … lay in the neutrality of large numbers of Christians." Alas, "the exclusive demand for a clear profession of allegiance to Christ caused the band of confessing Christians to become ever smaller."

The excluders – or shall we say, those (like Bonhoeffer) who pronounced judgment on the self-excluders? – had themselves now

become the excluded.

However, “precisely through [the church’s] concentration on the essential,” on Christ alone, so Bonhoeffer recalls, “there gathered around her [those] people who came from very far away, and people to whom she could not refuse her fellowship and her protection.” Who were these new outsiders? Bonhoeffer dared not list them by name, for obvious security reasons, lest the Gestapo find the list. So he identifies them as one would list the “Virtues” in the cast of a medieval morality play. They are: “Injured justice, oppressed truth, vilified humanity and violated freedom.” Notice, all these characters had themselves been suffering exclusion from their Nazi colleagues. So where could they turn for help? Answer: “These all sought for [the church], or rather for her Master, Jesus Christ.” Remember, they had come on their search “from very far away.” Bonhoeffer seems to have had in mind Germans like those he joined in the conspiracy, those humanists whom his Jewish-Christian brother-in-law, Gerhard Leibholz, called “the other Germany,” “the upholders of the European and Western tradition in Germany.” That was, compared to the Confessing Church, “very far away.”

But to these new outsiders, however far they had come, the church could not “refuse her fellowship.” For like the church they too had been excluded, if for apparently quite different reasons. Apparently different. Yet in these secular refugees, so Bonhoeffer marvels, the church “now had the living experience of that other saying of Jesus: ‘Whoever is not against us is for us’.” “For us”? These humanists? For “the church or, rather, for her Master, Jesus Christ”? Wasn’t Bonhoeffer being naive? No, they are “for us,” Bonhoeffer explains, because “Jesus gives his support to those who suffer for the sake of a just cause, even if this cause is not precisely the confession of His name.” That is, “He takes them under His protection, He accepts responsibility for them, and He lays claim to them,” all to the

profound surprise of those secularists themselves. Thus “it happens that in the hour of suffering and responsibility, perhaps for the first time in his life and in a way which is strange and surprising to him . . . , such a person appeals to Christ and professes himself a Christian because at this moment… he becomes aware that he belongs to Christ.”

Again Bonhoeffer assures his reader, this “is not an abstract deduction but… an experience which we ourselves have undergone, … in which the power of Jesus Christ became manifest in fields of life where it had previously remained unknown.”

C) Homesick Humanists

Bonhoeffer’s theological explanation of this experience, I suggest, is part of his “responsible interpretation” of Barmen, specifically on the issue of reprioritizing the authorities. First, consider those cultural values in European humanism which at the time were so under attack from the prevailing nihilism and brutality: “reason, culture, humanity, tolerance and self-determination, . . . concepts which until very recently had served as battle slogans against the Church, against Christianity, against Jesus Christ Himself.” Nevertheless, originally, where had those values come from? From Christianity. Their “origin [Ursprung] is Jesus Christ.” But in the intervening centuries of widespread defection from Christ, the “good” Europeans had “fallen away from their origin.”

Only as they are now made to suffer for their humane causes at the hands of Antichrist do these persecuted, “homeless” humanists rediscover their own Ursprung in Christ, who himself suffers for his claims of exclusiveness. What these secular martyrs discover is that the values for which they are persecuted are ultimately unsustainable without their basis in Jesus Christ. “It is not Christ who must justify Himself before the world by [his] acknowledgement of the values of justice,

truth and freedom." On the contrary, quite the reverse, "it is these values which have come to need justification, and their justification can only be Jesus Christ." But if he is their justification, altogether by grace, who is it, what sort of God, who demands such justification in the first place? That demand of a just God for a reckoning, and at such a cost, is that grace?

3. Then Is There Also A Contrary Reign Of God: Wrathful, Exclusionary?

A) Is Bonhoeffer suggesting, apparently contrary to Barmen's first thesis, that there is after all <u>another</u> "kingdom" or rule of God – say, the "wrath" of God – alongside God's gracious rule in Christ?

If the answer is yes, it can only be a very nuanced yes. For, notice, even though the cultural values of a secularized Christendom might somehow persist for awhile without their humanist practitioners acknowledging their source in Christ, it is he who is still their source, their only one. It is he, Jesus Christ, who still graciously acknowledges them even when they do not acknowledge him. And he acknowledges them as his by means of that gracious claim which the church, his church, makes in his behalf. So it does seem, at least at first glance, that God's reign in Christ, an inclusive reign, is God's only reign. Then is Bonhoeffer saying, the only authority God exercises is to include, never to exclude?

There does seem to be a real, persistent antithesis to grace. Is it our sin, our unbelief? Of course, but only that? True, sooner or later Christ in turn must be acknowledged if those humane values are to be "protected" and "justified." They cannot indefinitely survive apart from our recognizing Christ. At least

so Bonhoeffer seems to be saying. But if so, if those values perish for lack of nourishment from their root, possibly forever, isn't that perishing, that extinction also an action of God? It may not be an action of God apart from Christ. In fact it may be Christ's own judgment, but certainly not a judgment of Christ's grace? So isn't Bonhoeffer counterposing an antithesis to Barmen's Article One, especially if that article is suggesting that "the one Word of God" is always and only gracious?

B) Is The Other Kingdom the Antichrist's?

What is clear from Bonhoeffer's "most astonishing experience" is that there is definitely an adversary vastly more than human, a very real principality and power besides Christ, but worse, contrary to Christ—Antichrist. So real is this antagonist of Christ that, were it not for his antagonism, the homesick humanists may never have discovered their need of Christ, namely, in reaction to the tyrant's persecution of good causes and values? Yet by that very token, is this Antichrist then really all that anti, if in the end he is but a means to bringing people, at least some people, back to Christ? Wasn't Nazism's very terrorizing of the humane tradition "sufficient to awaken the consciousness of a kind of alliance and comradeship between the defenders of these endangered values and the Christians?" "The children of the Church, who had become independent and gone their own ways, now in the hour of danger returned to their mother."

That there is a "mother" is of course essential, also sheer grace. But also essential was the humanists' "hour of danger," their "hour of suffering and responsibility." For without that "hour" they may never have returned home. Sure, there is a striking affinity, a common ground, between "the Christ who is persecuted and suffers" and the humanists' own "concrete

suffering of injustice." Yet this common ground, their very need of Christ, is brought home to them by something presumably antithetical to Christ, namely by "Antichrist," personified in Hitler's Nazism. But if so, we are asking, is Antichrist finally all that antithetical, except as an intermediate stage in some larger, divine dialectic?

Repeat the question: This tyrant in whom Bonhoeffer spots the Antichrist, is that the one finally who conducts the contrary reign to Christ's reign of grace in the world? It might be comforting to think so. For that dualistic explanation would have the advantage of exempting God from the onus of being the adversary. Still, over and over, Bonhoeffer unflinchingly traces the current affliction he and his people are suffering to the retributive "wrath of God," which obviously is not grace. Indeed, says Bonhoeffer, it takes grace to be able even to recognize, as few of his contemporaries could, the "wrath of God" for what it is. So if there really were only one kingdom of God, by this time its oneness has become pretty problematic, dialectic or no dialectic.

C) Then Is The "Wrath Of God" The State?

Accordingly, it is not just the reign of human unbelief or even of Antichrist but finally of divine "wrath" which God's grace in Christ must come to terms with. For even Antichrist is outranked by that superior opponent, "the wrath of God." Yet the way divine wrath opposes Antichrist is definitely not the way divine grace does so. Wrath and grace may be joined in their opposition to a common foe, nevertheless they are also opposed to each other.

Divine wrath and divine grace are at least as opposed as state and church are. So, consider that church-state opposition as a parallel. Though church and state, too, may be allied against Antichrist, their alliance is at best a "polemical unity."

Furthermore, this polemic between them must somehow reflect a struggle within God. For the state is definitely God's doing. (That Lutheran, at least, Bonhoeffer still was.) The state is not Antichrist.

Notice, the Nazi regime, now turned Antichrist, no longer qualifies as "the state." On the contrary, it is the state's enemy. "The power of the state" has now passed to other hands, presumably the conspirators'. But even if this new "state" finds itself allied with the church of Christ, their alliance is still extremely strained. That is "the most astonishing experience." For these two newfound allies, church and state, fight with such markedly antithetical weapons that the two of them cannot help but be at odds. What is "astonishing" is not that they are "polemical" but that between them there is any "unity" at all.

In his Ethics Bonhoeffer resorts to Paul's Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, the classic reference to Antichrist, though of course Bonhoeffer has to keep the equation with Nazism cryptic. In that epistle who is it, besides the church, who opposes Antichrist? It is as the apostle calls him "the restrainer." (II Thess. 2:7) Bonhoeffer now identifies that "restrainer" with "the force of order, equipped with great physical strength." "Force of order," "great physical strength" (a bomb in a briefcase?): these are precisely not the weapons of Christ's church. Quite the opposite.

"The 'restrainer' is the power of the state to establish and maintain order." In Bonhoeffer's current circumstance "the restrainer" appears in the persons of those anti-Hitler co-conspirators like his brother Klaus, his brother-in-law von Dohnanyi, Admiral Canaris, General Oster and others, military officers and politicians, secret agents and lawyers, executives and intellectuals who are using their power to plot tyrannicide. That, shall we say, is an act of consummate exclusion. It does

not take much imagination to see that as the wrath of God.

D) Church And State As Co-Sufferers, But Whose Co-Sufferers?

"The 'restrainer,' the force of order, sees in the Church an ally, and will. . . seek a place at her side." The two, church and restrainer, "are entirely different in nature [verschieden in ihrem Wesen], yet in the face of imminent chaos they are in close alliance." The church's unique task is that of proclaimer, "preaching the risen Jesus Christ," "the saving act of God, which intervenes from . . . beyond whatever is historically attainable." By contrast, "the 'restrainer' is the force which takes effect within history through God's governance of the world, and which sets due limits to evil." One thing the proclaimer and the restrainer have in common: they are "both alike objects of the hatred of the [Nazi] forces of destruction, which see in them [both proclaimer and restrainer] their deadliest enemies."

As a consequence of their being hated in common, proclaimer and restrainer have something else in common: persecution. Notice the incongruity. The restrainers— admirals and generals and political conspirators—are by vocation and commitment all people of power, "equipped with great physical strength," "the power of the state to establish and maintain order." Yet in this "hour of suffering and responsibility" they find themselves to be instead the weak, the persecuted, the suffering. In their "hour of danger" they, the weakened strong, see the proclaimer-church as likewise suffering. It too is suffering exclusion because of its exclusiveness. The two, church and state, are co-sufferers.

If anything, the restrainers see that the church's suffering, by comparison with their own, "presents an infinitely greater danger to the spirit of destruction [Nazi Antichrist] than does

any political power [of their own] which may still remain." Above all, "through her

message of the living Lord Jesus Christ the Church makes it clear that she is not concerned merely for the maintenance and preservation of the past." The "miracle" entrusted to her is "a raising of the dead." With that, "even the forces of order," namely the conspirators or the restrainers, are compelled "to listen and turn back." They, "after long straying from the path, are once more finding their way back to their fountain-head."

The church in turn dare "not reject those who come to her and seek to place themselves at her side." "While still preserving the essential distinction [wohl gewahrter Unterscheidung] between herself and these forces," at the same time "she unreserved allies herself with them [in aufrichtiger Bundesgenossenschaft.]" How the church is to do that, we shall soon see. But in passing let us note that in this long section in his Ethics Bonhoeffer is trying in so many words to recoup Luther's "doctrine of the two kingdoms." In the centuries after the Reformation that doctrine had degenerated into a false "emancipation and sanctification of the world and of the natural." By contrast, for Luther as for Bonhoeffer "there are two kingdoms which, so long as the world continues, must neither be mixed together nor yet be torn asunder. There is the kingdom of the preached word of God, and there is the kingdom of the sword." The King in both cases may be the same, but his kingdoms definitely are not. Here Bonhoeffer definitely sounds like Luther.

4. The "Polemical Unity" As "This

People”

A) “My People”

So there are two kingdoms, the one of the preached Word and the other of the sword, which “so long as the world continues must neither be mixed together not yet be torn asunder.” However, we dare not stop there. For “the Lord of both kingdoms is the God who is made manifest in Jesus Christ.” How to retrieve that “doctrine of the two kingdoms,” where both kingdoms are held together under the same Lord? And how to do that not just theoretically but “concretely,” for a suffering church ministering to suffering restrainers on its doorstep?

In answering that question we should emphasize what in Bonhoeffer studies is often de- emphasized, that the weak and the suffering for whom Bonhoeffer found himself called always included, perhaps especially, “Germany.” By that, so far as I can tell, Bonhoeffer meant Germany as a Christian Volk. (Bonhoeffer did not concede the National Socialists a monopoly on that ethnic term.) But a Christian folk. Notice: Christian, not sinless, not right or righteous. “Germany”, for Bonhoeffer, meant this uneasy reunion of the church and “the promising Godless,” this Christentum. “I have loved this people,” he exclaimed. Of all the “voiceless” ones in whose behalf he spoke—the Jews, the victims of euthanasia, the “illegal” Finkenwaldians—no oppressed group seems so fully to have engaged his confessor’s energies as did his fellow-countrymen, and surely not because of their innocence. For his solidarity with innocent victims, Bonhoeffer is renowned. For his solidarity with guilty ones, he is not renowned.

In this special sense of “Germany” Bonhoeffer was as outspokenly pro-German as those in the confessing movement who, church-politically, seemed to be his opposites—for example, Werner

Elert, who long before had written his own Kampf um das Christentum. Does that make Bonhoeffer a nationalist? Hardly. Bonhoeffer opposed "internationalism" for the same reason he opposed its cause, "nationalism," since both were alike "revolutionary" enemies of the corpus christianum. Re-enter Christentum, this Christian, German people. It may be that Bonhoeffer's agonizing for his own people is underemphasized in the histories about him lest he might appear insufficiently different on that score from the "German Christians." That would be the gravest of errors. His theological cause was diametrically opposed to theirs. For him "the question really is: Germanism or Christianity." His passion, as it was Elert's, was not for a German Christianity but for a Christian Germany. Without Christ the Ursprung, at least for Bonhoeffer, Germany could not truly be a people.

B) A Nation? Or A Civilization?

During his first stay in the United States, in 1930, Bonhoeffer told a New York congregation, "We [Christians] are no longer Americans or Germans, we are one large congregation of brethren." But then he added, "Now I stand before you not only as a Christian, but also as a German, who rejoices with his people and who suffers when he sees his people suffering . . . ." And their suffering, their mass deaths and impoverishment and starvation and epidemics as a result of World War I but still evident in 1930, Bonhoeffer vividly recounts to his American hearers. He has the boldness to add, no one "who knows well the history of the origin of the war [World War One] believes that Germany bears the sole guilt of the war—a sentence which we were compelled to sign in the Treaty of Versailles."

Less than a decade after that sermon Bonhoeffer was back in New York, but this time for barely a month. Germany was now going back to war, diametrically contradicting Bonhoeffer's earlier

prediction. That put him in a mortal quandary. Should he absent himself from this evil war? Or return to engage in it? We know his answer. No sooner had he arrived in the States than he cancelled his plans for an American stay and promptly returned. As he explained to Reinhold Niebuhr, “I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany.” “Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose.” There, in that choice of his, we have Bonhoeffer’s rationale for the conspiracy: to give evidence to the Allies that there is in fact an “other Germany,” which the victors dare not again destroy by demanding unconditional surrender. Leave aside that the conspiracy failed and that the Allies were heedless.

5) How The Unity Works:

A. Secretly The Unity Works Non-Religiously

Bonhoeffer’s role in the conspiracy concretizes how he saw the church entering into aufrichtigen Bundesgenossenschaft with the state, specifically with the “restrainer,” that “power of the state to establish and maintain order.” His own conspiratorial role in this church-state alliance was not as a public representative of the church but nonetheless as one of its servantlike, “arcane” disciples. Yet as I see it, that very feature of arcane, servantlike discipleship is exactly the most significant feature of Bonhoeffer’s “responsible interpretation” of Barmen. That is, in the end it is a “nonreligious interpretation,” particularly so with reference to Barmen’s prickliest issue, the reprioritizing of spiritual and secular authorities. And Bonhoeffer’s non-religious interpretation is,

as Bethge would add, “more an ethical than a hermeneutical category and also a direct call to penitence directed to the Church and its present form.” “Non- religious” and “arcane” entail repentance, and repentance is emphatically servantlike.

What is arcane or hidden about the disciples’ “discipline” as they practice it concretely amongst their homesick humanists is precisely the “non-religious” exterior of that discipline. Amongst themselves, by contrast, when they gather in the explicit name of their Lord to hear his gospel and receive his sacraments, or in private intra-believer conversation or correspondence, there the cultus and prayers and hymnody and theological discourse are still openly exercised. But in the believers’ secular associations their “religious” practice is kept secret or, if we may put it so, is restrained. That religious restraint out in the world is their disciplina. This self-restraint on religiousness, not to mention religiosity, is not altogether different from the restraint placed upon civil evil and disorder by the “restrainer.” For it is part of the very promise of our age that it is “godless,” not only by its own apostasy but by God’s intentional acquiescence therein. The purpose is to make of the age an age of grown-up responsibility, no longer baby-sat by the tutelary supports of religion and pietism.

B) A Unity Of Suffering Sinners

However, arcane as the believers’ discipline is in their associations with “the promising godless,” let us emphasize: the locale in which they exercise that secret, as secret, is precisely the most worldly of contexts. And what is that well-kept secret of their inner- worldly discipleship? It is their world-affirming solidarity with the other worldlings, especially in the latters’ sufferings and most especially in their suffering together from sin. Theirs is a solidarity of the

penitents. Four and a half years after Bonhoeffer's return from America he finds himself in Tegel prison on trial for his crimes, justly so, and writes of this to his friend Bethge. "I haven't for a moment regretted coming back in 1939—nor any of the consequences, either. . . . And I regard my being kept here … as being involved in Germany's fate, as I was resolved to be." But the arcanum, the secret of one's penitential co-involvement with fellow-sinners is the doing of that "in faith." "All we can do," Bonhoeffer confides to Bethge, "is to live in assurance and faith—you out there with the soldiers, and I in my cell."

Bonhoeffer's collusion with the restrainers, really as one of them, implicated him in the most grievous sins. That he was mortally guilty, as he himself recognized, we minimize or heroize only by not taking his penitence seriously. He and his fellow conspirators were "good" people only relatively to the "wicked," whose sin is not "suffering" sin, but not because the conspirators and their acts did not need Christ's "justification." That was their most abject need. For all of them, deceit, connivance, forgery, feigning loyalty to the Fuehrer, misleading their fellow Christians, endangering the lives of others, conspiring to kill were not lapses of weakness but deliberate policy. Worse yet, with all this came their often overwhelming temptations to cynicism and despair. However, the culpability of those few conspirators only writes large what is everyday truth for the church in the world generally. In Bethge's words, "This 'borderline case' is … an example of being Christian today."

6. The Secret Church: Co-Atoning For The World

But then how, through such clandestine collaboration with the worldlings' sin, are the church's believers being church? For

that, as Bonhoeffer sees it, is what they are in their solidarity with the world as it is: not just private, isolated Christians but representatives of the church of Christ, though hiddenly. But then all the worse, how as the church's representatives are they really any different from those who do not (yet) acknowledge Christ? Where is there here any meaningful entry of the church, let alone of Christ, into the world? Bonhoeffer's answer employs the extravagant picture of worldly Christians as agents of "atonement." As penitent and forgiving co-sinners, these Christian collaborators infiltrate the state with that exclusive churchly authority which the state does not have, the all-inclusive, sinner-embracing authority to atone.

Bonhoeffer pondered how in the New Testament the Christian "who suffers in the power of the body of Christ suffers in a representative capacity 'for' the Church." "For while it is true that only the suffering of Christ himself can atone for sin, and that his suffering and triumph took place 'for us,' yet to some … he vouchsafes the immeasurable grace and privilege of suffering 'for him,' as he did for them." By the end of his days Bonhoeffer must have seen that this "vicarious activity and passivity on the part of the members of the Body," this "immeasurable grace and privilege" extended also to himself.

The quotation just cited comes from Cost of Discipleship. But already in his doctoral dissertation, Sanctorum Communio, Bonhoeffer, barely out of his teens, was writing about "the love which of its own free will is ready to incur God's wrath for its brother's sake, . . . which takes its brother's place as Christ took our place for us." Bonhoeffer there recalls how "Moses wished to be blotted out of the book of life with his people, and

Paul wished that he himself were accursed and cut off from Christ, not in order to be condemned with his brethren, but to

win communion with God for them; he wishes to be condemned in their stead." Years later, less than a year before his execution, in his poem "The Death of Moses," there is the line: "God, this people I have loved." As Bethge assures us, by "this people" Bonhoeffer "did not mean the Church, but Germany." And of this people, he writes, "that I bore its shame and sacrifices/ And saw its salvation– that suffices."

7. The Fallacy Of "Two-Zones Thinking"

A) The Fallacy: Not No Unity But Forced Unity

The way Bonhoeffer retrieves Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms is as a "polemical unity." By contrast, what Bonhoeffer repudiates, as he believes Luther also did, is a "thinking in terms of two spheres" (Raeumen) or "spaces." It would be tempting, as the literature about Bonhoeffer betrays, to misunderstand his objection as if he were against the two-ness of the kingdoms. He is not. Their Unterscheidung is essential. That they are "opposites" (Gegensaetze) is essential to their "unity." Else it would not be a "polemical unity."

What Bonhoeffer objects to is a two-ness which regards secular and Christian as "ultimate static" opposites, as "mutually exclusive givens." And what is it that is wrong with this mutual exclusiveness? Not that it discourages all interest in unity. On the contrary, that interest persists in any event. But now, given the false assumption of a mutual exclusiveness, the kind of unity which people then seek is a "forced unity." It is a unity which subjugates one opposite to the other in some imposed system, either sacred or profane.

Moreover, when secular and spiritual are construed not as polemically unified—the way, I would think, two debaters in a

dialogue are unified—but instead as mutually repellent spheres whose unity has to be forced, then one of the two, alas, tends to be identified with "Christ" and the other with "the world." That restricts the reality in Christ to merely a partial reality. It forces people to abandon reality as a single whole and to seek either Christ without the world or the world without Christ. But it is the whole world that Christ has won for himself. There are not two realities, only one: his. All that is real is real only in him.

Granted, not all that is real in Christ (Christuswirklichkeit) is yet "realization" (Wirklichwerden.) Though the world is included in his reality, it only very partially recognizes that. That part of the world which does recognize itself as his is the church, das Christliche. "What is Christian" is not identical with "das Weltliche." Though the two are one reality as Christ's, they still are polemical opposites.

On the other hand, what is Christian—that is, what is church—by no means exhausts what is Christ's. For Bonhoeffer that distinction, too, is decisive. "The dominion of the commandment of Christ over all creation is not to be equated with the dominion of the Church." That is what a triumphalist church forgets, as the Roman church did in expanding its ecclesiastical power over the secular. That is why Luther polemicized in behalf of secular authority. He "was protesting against a Christianity which was striving for independence" from the secular. But by doing so, alas, that newly independent Christianity was also "detaching itself from the reality in Christ."

Of course, the reverse also happens, as the militant secularism of the Nazi Antichrist brazenly illustrated: das Weltliche forcibly denies its dependence on das Christliche, only dramatizing thereby its renunciation of Christ. To this great divorce the church contributed when, as in Pseudoluthertum after

the Reformation, “the autonomy of the orders of this world” is counterposed to “the law of Christ.” As this escapist distortion of Luther’s two-kingdoms theology showed, “any attempt to escape from the world must sooner or later be paid for with a sinful surrender to the world.” Bonhoeffer’s critique of this “so-called Lutheran” doctrine of the two kingdoms has been widely and enthusiastically advertised. And that definitely was one, though only one, of his favorite examples of post-Reformation “thinking in two spheres”.

B) Another Example: Ecclesiastical Theocracy

There is a second example of post-Reformation “thinking in two spheres” which Bonhoeffer almost always mentions in the same breath with his faulting of the “pseudo- Lutheran” doctrine. But this second culprit is frequently purged from the citations by Bonhoeffer enthusiasts, particularly by those with Barthian proclivities. As a result it is less well known that Bonhoeffer, perhaps especially in his later years when he became increasingly critical of his own Confessing Church, mounted strong objections against “ecclesiastical theocracy” or, as he also called it, “Enthusiasm” (Schwaermertum.) In the same sentence in which he commends Luther for protesting “with the help of the secular and in the name of a better Christianity,” Bonhoeffer adds, “So, too, today, when Christianity is employed as a polemical weapon against the secular, this must be done in the name of a better secularity.” “Above all it must not lead back to a static predominance of the spiritual sphere [Sakralitaet] as an end in itself.”

For Bonhoeffer the classical form of this “ecclesiastical theocracy,” itself a version of “two spheres thinking,” is that “scheme of the Enthusiasts” in which “the congregation of the Elect takes up the struggle with a hostile world for the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth.” In face of such

Enthusiasm Bonhoeffer agrees that “there is good reason for laying stress on the autonomy of the state in opposition to the heteronomy of an ecclesiastical theocracy.”

True, the church must raise questions, for example, about “certain economic or social attitudes and conditions which are a hindrance to faith in Christ and which consequently destroy the true character of [humanity] in the world.” (As examples Bonhoeffer mentions “socialism or collectivism” but first of all “capitalism.”) However, “the Church cannot indeed proclaim a concrete earthly order which follows as a necessary consequence from faith in Jesus Christ.” On the one hand, the church’s “negative” strictures against those social attitudes which subvert faith in Christ do need to be made “by the authority of the word of God,” as “divine,” as “doctrine.” On the other hand, the church’s “positive ” “contributions toward the establishment of a new order” are not doctrine but “Christian life,” “earthly,” “not by the authority of God but merely on the authority of the responsible advice of Christian specialists and experts.”

C) Still Worse: America’s “Enthusiastic Spiritualism”

The “enthusiastic spiritualism” which Bonhoeffer faults as an instance of “two spheres thinking” he finds exemplified in the Anglo-Saxon countries and particularly in the USA. In the development of American democracy the dominant influence, more dominant than Calvinist ideas of original sin, was the spiritualism of the Dissenters who took refuge in America: “the idea that the Kingdom of God on earth cannot be built by the authority of the state but only by the congregation of the faithful.” True, Bonhoeffer concedes, America too is “suffering from severe symptoms of secularization.” But there “the cause does not lie in the misinterpretation of the distinction between

the two offices or kingdoms, but rather in the reverse of this." And what is that? Answer: "the failure of the enthusiasts to distinguish at all between the office or kingdom of the state and the office or kingdom of the Church."

That, too, we recall, is a form of "two spheres thinking." And in this case, too, it "ends (only with the total capitulation of the Church to the world." Bonhoeffer finds that documented by "the New York church registers." "Godlessness remains more covert. And indeed in this way it deprives the Church even of the blessing of suffering and of the possible rebirth which suffering may engender."

8) What The War Was Really For: The Polemical Unity, Christentum

So we return to Bonhoeffer's (Luther's?) doctrine of the two kingdoms. It is a solidarity of the suffering church with the suffering world, both suffering from their common sin. In that solidarity between two "polemical opposites" the church is represented not as an ecclesiastical theocracy, whether of the left or of the right, imposing its agenda upon the state, though it does call all society to account for its subversion of faith in Christ. Nor in this solidarity is the church's most positive contribution the "earthly" wisdom it offers toward "a new order." That, too. But the church's "immeasurable grace and privilege" is through its servantlike disciples in the world. It is their unique authority, as church, penitently and forgivingly to "atone" for their people – and for now, arcanely. With that comes "the possible rebirth which suffering may engender."

Might this Bonhoeffer, both in his life and his writings, qualify as a "responsible interpretation" of Barmen, maybe even a Lutheran one, specifically on the embattled issue of

reprioritizing the authorities? For he does describe the church's battle in its entirety, not only as a Kampf amongst the Kirchen to exclude the inner-church secularization of the gospel. He does that, too, and first of all, though only as a Vorqeplaenkel, a preliminary skirmish. But especially does he engage the major battle, that Kampf um das Christentum, in which the church contends for the world as sinner among sinners, but atoningly as suffering servant? That is the polemical unity which Bonhoeffer envisioned. And that polemical unity, as he saw it, constitutes " Christian civilization." And that polemically unified Christentum, in turn, is what the real Kampf was all about. If so, if that is what Bonhoeffer was fighting for, let alone Luther, do they still have takers? Who can afford to be that inclusive, and on those terms?

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The Authority To Be (Culpably) Inclusive (PDF)