

Waiting for the Word.

Bonhoeffer's 'Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge' and the Churches' Embarrassment in Speaking about God.

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"It's an unconscious waiting for the word of deliverance, though the time is probably not yet ripe for it to be heard. But the time will come..." (Letter from March 25, 1944)

This paper intends to offer a reconstruction of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's conception of God talk, using as a basis the letter he wrote from prison in May 1944, on the occasion of the baptism of his godchild. These "Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge"⁽¹⁾ still represent a fascinating text. In these few condensed pages Bonhoeffer, with an almost prophetic perspicacity, shows himself to be aware of the churches' continuing embarrassment in speaking about God. We know that there are cultural reasons for that inability: religious scepticism and relativism nowadays seems not only to affect (post) modern culture in general, but also touches the unconcernedness in the churches' preaching. Moreover, and perhaps even more disquieting, we have to acknowledge the enduring incapability of the churches to stand by the Word they proclaim. How can the church deal honestly with its past, without obscuring the liberating presence of God? Talking freely about God seems to be more and more problematic in our days. The Reformed confession that "the Proclamation of God's Word *is* God's Word" (*Praedicatio verbi divini est verbum divinum*, Confessio Helvetica) seems to be a presumptuous overstatement. Maybe negative theology offers a more viable solution for Christian churches today. Is not all we can say about God that we can say nothing about him?

We focus on the "Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge", as we assume this text to be crucial in Bonhoeffer's

theological evolution. As a persistent - although critical - ally of Karl Barth's dialectical Word theology, Bonhoeffer had developed his own version of a theology which creates room for a speaking God. Accordingly, the Baptism Letter refers to the liberating power that lies in the Word of God. But at the same time, Bonhoeffer observes in this text the actual impasse in the church's speaking of God's Word. In his critical analysis of the reasons for that impotence, there is another side of Bonhoeffer that comes to the fore: here, we meet a modern and secularized theologian, who sharply diagnoses the failure of Christianity before a changed world. For that reason, the Baptism Letter represents a crucial moment in the test of Bonhoeffer's theological theory of the Word. I think, it can be considered as a cross-over in his theological biography. The letter was conceived after more than one year of captivity in Tegel, May 1944. It originates from the period in which Bonhoeffer pressed his friend Eberhard Bethge progressively with his new gained theological insights on a "world come of age" and a "non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts". "What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today", he writes as a running start to those theological explorations, in the famous and crucial letter bearing date April 30, 1944.⁽²⁾ In the following days Bonhoeffer must have composed his Baptism Letter. It was sent out of prison as a substitute for the sermon and the sacrament, which he was not able to render to his new born nephew, because of his captivity. The preaching of God's Word in a non-religious world - it is this combination of Reformation orthodoxy on the one hand and cultural sensibility on the other, that make Bonhoeffer's letters from prison still an intriguing and inspiring document.

1. The performative force of the Word of God

The Baptism Letter opens with the observation that in Western civilisation radical changes are coming about, which will imply the definite end of bourgeois culture. When the child that receives baptism today will be grown up, Bonhoeffer states, the bourgeois form of life will be "a vanished world." Apparently, an era is closing. Although Bonhoeffer is considering himself doubtless as a product of this era, he does not want to look back in a nostalgic way; on the contrary, he directs his view hopefully to the future. He is convinced of the fact that the substance of the fading cultural patterns, which have proved themselves to be reliable in the past, will also survive the new age. "The old spirit, after a time of misunderstanding and weakness, withdrawal and recovery, preservation and rehabilitation, will produce new forms." This assurance makes that Bonhoeffer comes to meet the future with tranquillity. "So there is no need to hurry; *we have to be able to wait*", he writes (italics added).⁽³⁾ "The old spirit will create itself new forms", but when that will happen, and how, and in which shape this forms will finally

manifest themselves we do not know yet. We shall have to wait for it confidentially.

This last statement is important with regards to Bonhoeffer's vision of the future of Christian faith, which he develops in prison. Bonhoeffer continues his letter with a set of theological observations, which can be read in obvious correlation to his cultural analysis. According to Bonhoeffer, bourgeois culture and Christianity are, in a certain sense, sharing an analogous destiny. We read about an era that comes to an end and about the dawning of a new one, not only for culture in general but also with regards to Christian faith. Bonhoeffer talks about "earlier words", bound to "lose their force". At the same time he expresses his expectation of "a new language", "liberating and redeeming".

Before I shall comment on this fragment more extensively, I want to quote it at length:

Today you will be baptized a Christian. All those great ancient words of the Christian proclamation will be spoken over you, and the command of Jesus Christ to baptize will be carried out on you, without your knowing anything about it. But we are once again being driven right back to the beginnings of our understanding. Reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship - all these things are so difficult and so remote that we can hardly venture any more to speak of them. In the traditional words and acts we suspect that there may be something quite new and revolutionary, though we cannot as yet grasp or express it. This is our own fault. Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among men. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of the melting-pot, and any attempt to help the church prematurely to a new expansion of its organization will merely delay its conversion and purification. It is not for us to prophesy the day (though that day will come) when man will once more be called so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it. It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming - as was Jesus' language; it will shock people and yet overcome them by its power; it will be the language of a new righteousness and truth, proclaiming God's peace with men and the coming of his kingdom. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it' (Jer. 33.9). Till then the Christian cause will be a silent and hidden affair, but there will be those who

pray and do right and wait for God's own time. May you be one of them, and may it be said of you one day, The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter till full day' (Prv. 4.18).⁽⁴⁾

Attentive reading shows that Bonhoeffer does not plead for a theological break with Christian tradition. On the contrary, according to him our earlier words' still possess a revolutionary potential. Bonhoeffer seems rather to assign to traditional faith a meaning surplus than a lack of meaning. God does not keep silence; Bonhoeffer's confidence in the God who wants to express his Word through the mouth of people seems unbroken. The day will come that it will be spoken again, shocking, liberating and redeeming. Language almost explodes, when Bonhoeffer expresses the revolutionary power of the Word of God.

With a helpful distinction familiar in modern language theory, one can say that in Bonhoeffer's view biblical God talk uses a *performative* language.⁽⁵⁾ Genuine speaking of God creates and transforms the human situation in a liberating way. Bonhoeffer does not reproach current God talk for having a lack of descriptive adequacy, as if the traditional words of Christian faith have lost their referential meaning. His first aim is to point at the transforming effect of God talk, be it religious or eventually even non-religious, not to their semantic content.

In which source does this redemptive new language Bonhoeffer hopes for originate? The Baptism Letter is quite plain about that: the new language owes its performative force to Christ himself. "It will be liberating and redeeming - *as was Jesus' language*", Bonhoeffer states. Hearing Jesus' Gospel is a shocking event, that transforms one's entire being, because it represents a confrontation with the Lord himself and his coming kingdom.

2. "It is our own fault" (the pragmatic setting)

The question arises why in Bonhoeffer's days the church has become unable to speak the liberating Word of God. What is the reason for this inability? Why was Jesus' language - and in his track the apostles' - once capable in acting out redemption, whereas ours is not? Again, Bonhoeffer is very clear about the reason why. He states shortly: "That is our own fault". Obviously the church's proclamation of the Gospel misses the *exousia* which the language of Jesus did once actually possessed. Why is this? Once more, not its referential unclarity or ambiguity is held responsible for that, but the Word's speaker himself; the Word of God is powerless, not because it lacks its object

(the absence of God), but rather because it has an incompetent subject that no longer supports its original authority with his total existence.

Anew, in this context linguistic theory provides us with some useful analytical tools. When we say that our God talk lacks *meaning*, we are pointing at its *semantic* aspect. In his diagnosis Bonhoeffer contends, however, that the real origin of this factually experienced weakness is not to be looked for in semantics, but rather in the *pragmatics*: its source lies in the defective link between the speaker and his word, not in the relation between the word and God's reality it tries to depict. That we cannot grasp any more the meaning of words such as reconciliation and redemption, cross and resurrection is a mere symptom for a disease that has its roots elsewhere: in the incredibility of the church which proclaims them. "It is our own fault."

Modern philosophy of language stresses the social imbeddedness of language and the relevance of the pragmatic context for linguistic communication. According to the late Wittgenstein, culture incorporates a variety of different language games, which are located in shared social practices and a variety of forms of life. Language (also religious language) appears to be structured and regulated by the conventions and institutions people live in. That means - we are still employing the linguistic idiom here - that the performance of a speech act can only be successful, if certain conditions concerning this pragmatic context have been met. A pragmatic setting in general consists of three elements, dependent on the scope one has in view. (1) The speaking person (as well as the person addressed to) (*personal* level); (2) the institutional framework, in which the communication occurs (*institutional* level); (3) its broader historical and cultural setting (*situational* level).

Going back to our text now, we read how Bonhoeffer blames his church for "fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though it were an end in itself." Precisely there he situates the reason for its kerugmatic impotence. "Our earlier words are *therefore* bound to lose their force and cease," he concludes (*italics mine*). We shall see below that Bonhoeffer's grievance against his church concerns the three aspects of the pragmatic context, by which the liberating proclamation of God's Word should be supported.

In stressing Bonhoeffer's accent on the pragmatic, rather than on the semantic reasons for the churches' embarrassment in speaking about God, I want to make room for the thesis that Bonhoeffer, even in his last letters from prison, retains his belief in the outstanding power of God's Word. In doing so, he confirms until the end his allegiance to the theological concept of the Word of God, as developed by Karl Barth. Bonhoeffer adopted it in the midst of the twenties, and apparently never abandoned it since. It should be

added however, that already in his first writings he accentuated, stronger than Barth ever did, the intrinsic relation between the Word of God and the configuration (*Gestalt*) of the church. "Effective preaching only is possible in the sanctorum communio," we read in his dissertation from 1927. "The community creates the Word, as the Word creates the community into community."⁶ This indissoluble tie between church and Word is confirmed and retained during Bonhoeffer's entire theological biography, including the letters and papers from prison. But at that time, however, Bonhoeffer is forced to recognize that not only the German church in general, but also 'his' Confessing Church has failed. There seems to be no subject left any more to speak the Word of God. At that moment Bonhoeffer seems to be confronted with an aporetic situation: he stresses the human incompetence in speaking rightly about God to its extremes, but simultaneously he does not want to detach himself from his theological heritage, the barthian Word of God theology, firmly rooted in the dogmatic and homiletic tradition of the Reformation. To Bonhoeffer at that very moment, the only way one can still speak authentically about God is a qualified way of being silent, a kind of linguistic moratorium until further notice. Speaking about God becomes synonymous with *waiting on God*, until the day He might reveal himself in human language again.

Apparently Bonhoeffer solves his theological dilemma, not by easing its pressure, but on the contrary by incorporating the aporetic situation with which he is confronted in the core of his theology: the *aporia* (to speak about God and knowing not to be able to do it well) is not conquered dialectically nor seen as an avoidable consequence of certain wrong theological premises, but it lies in the heart of theology itself in the age to come. It follows that Bonhoeffer challenges the aporetic situation above all things in a practical way, not by constructing another theory; according to him a different-based *praxis pietatis* ("pray and do right") is needed in the first place.

Before elaborating this thesis in some more detail, I note that the Bonhoeffer interpretation here presented (1) assumes a relative continuity in his theological development; (2) distances itself somewhat from the attempt - particularly popular among representatives of the so-called theology of secularization - to consider Bonhoeffer above all things as a model for linguistic innovation in theology. In my opinion, his project of a non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts has never been worked out sufficiently to satisfy that claim.

3. *Deus dixit* (Karl Barth's *a priori*)

The theological presupposition that lies at the basis of the defended performativity of the Word of God, Bonhoeffer borrows from Karl Barth. One can summarize it in two words: *Deus dixit*. The phrase implicates that (1) God reveals himself (in another metaphor: "speaks") (2) decisively in Jesus Christ, the outstanding *Logos Theou*, Word of God. That means that theological speaking about God should be preceded by the act of listening to God's own Word. Before we talk about God, God talks about himself to us. All our theological speaking is speaking in hindsight; our words about God will only be trustworthy, when they find their source in his own self-revealing Word. It follows that the genuine subject of our theological knowledge is not the theologian, but God himself.

How strongly Barth really did influence Bonhoeffer is still a point of discussion.⁽⁷⁾ It is a fact however that it was decisive and radical in any case. Since 1925, when Bonhoeffer as a student read Barth's book *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, his thinking was deeply affected by the critical reorientation Barth introduced in theology. In a seminar paper from 1925 Bonhoeffer affirms without reserve Barth's epistemological ground decision: "The equal can only be known by equal, God by God." How is human speaking about God then still possible? Bonhoeffer's solution is Barth's: "The object of knowledge creates organs in the subject for knowing in the act of knowledge itself."⁽⁸⁾

Some years later, Bonhoeffer gives, as a teacher at the Berlin University, an extensive depiction of the turn ("Wende") Barth carried out in theology. His lectures on the "History of Systematic Theology in the 20th Century" (1931 - 1933) show how Bonhoeffer is deeply involved as a theologian personally. It was Barth's intention, Bonhoeffer states, to create room again in theology for God's free and sovereign acting. "Only where He speaks himself, we know something about Him. No retrospectively postulated concept of revelation makes him speak. Only from the self enacting revelation we know God as the origin, which can not be founded elsewhere and founds everything. (...) The Word of God is preeminently *petitio principii*. *Deus dixit* - assuming that is the beginning of all real theological thinking. (...) The only object of theology is the Logos Theou, the self grounding acting of God. Behind this origin we cannot go back any more."⁽⁹⁾

Here Bonhoeffer follows Barth completely. But in his emphatic christological concentration he lays his own accents. God's self-revelation occurs in the person of Christ, namely in an intelligible way. This word, Christ, is really God himself in his total freedom, yet at the same time wrapped up in the cloak of history, humanity. Indeed, "God is totally different ("ganz anderes") than the human being. But when He speaks, he speaks concealedly, that is to say in a human way."⁽¹⁰⁾ In this christological intensification Bonhoeffer's

criticism on Barth, already expressed in his dissertation and especially in his habilitation *Act and Being* (1931), resounds. There, Bonhoeffer accuses Barth's epistemology of being actualistic and individualistic. According to Bonhoeffer, the *locus* for the knowledge of God is not the faith of the individual believer, but the community of the church. God has *given* his Word, he stresses in *Act and Being*. God's sovereignty does not imply that He withdraws himself in his *aseitas*, but it rather means that he binds himself in free will to people. "God is not free from humankind; He is free *for* it. Christ is the Word of the freedom of God."⁽¹¹⁾ In the proclaimed Christ, He is "tangible", He is "to be had" in the church. The church, Bonhoeffer had already claimed in *Sanctorum Communio*, coining a Hegelian formula, is "Christ existing as community". By means of this christology-based ecclesiology Bonhoeffer accentuates the continuity of revelation, against Barth's actualism. In the church as the Body of Christ the revelation is more or less "possessed".⁽¹²⁾

We see that already in his earlier theology Bonhoeffer links the presence of God indissolubly to the concrete existence (*Gestalt*) of the church. The free and sovereign God acts through the creative and transforming word spoken in and by a community of people. We observe that the same concept still determines the Baptism Letter, though it is stretched there to its ultimate limits.

Throughout his theological existence, Bonhoeffer ascribes to the Word of God a strong performative force. Though decisively spoken in Christ, Bonhoeffer states in his lecture on *Creation and Fall*, its transforming power originates in fact in God's act of creation. "And God spoke: `that there be light'" (Gen.1.3). "In the beginning was the Word ... and all things were created by the Word." (John 1, 1 - 3). Biblically spoken, the original Word of God is a *dabar*, a deed-word ("Tatwort"). It works out what it says. Our human words, however, have lost that force; they have become symbols, signs, ideas or meanings; they are used to refer to reality, they do not create it.⁽¹³⁾ It becomes impossible for us to be the intermediary of God's Word to this world any more. It is human sin which can be held responsible for that loss of power of speech. "The fallen creation is not the creation of the first, creating word any more."⁽¹⁴⁾ Christ however represents the renewed Word, which God wants to address to humankind, in the midst of its silent world. "The Logos is a powerful Creator's word."⁽¹⁵⁾ The Logos Theou, Christ, is not an idea but a person; He represents the forgiving and commanding appeal ("Ansprache") of God to humankind.

In his lectures on *Christology* (1933), Bonhoeffer retains the link between christology and ecclesiology, pointed out earlier, by stating that this new Word of God, Christ, is spoken to us by means of the concrete forms of the

living church, differentiated as (1) the proclamation of the Gospel, in interpreting the Scriptures that give witness of Christ; (2) the sacraments, and (3) the congregation itself as a social community. In this variety of forms, the church represents the given Word of God. The church is *Christus praesens*.

Briefly summarizing the Word theology Bonhoeffer develops in his early years, one can say that according to him the one Word of God displays four different forms. First of all and basically, it is the creating and sustaining Word of God as spoken in the beginning. Then, this Word is spoken again in the incarnate Logos, Christ, and subsequently in the Scriptures witnessing to him. Finally - and here we see Bonhoeffer putting a deliberate accent on ecclesiology, compared with Barth⁽¹⁶⁾ - the church in its proclamation of the Gospel and its social configuration, through which the first three forms of the Word of God are actualized in the present situation. In the Word preached in the church, God himself brings us anew in contact with our origins, transforming and recreating our sinful existence. In his Finkenwalde lectures on *Homiletics* Bonhoeffer declares preaching to be "the happening truth. It creates itself its own form of existence."⁽¹⁷⁾ The church embodies that form of existence. With Luther Bonhoeffer considers the Word of the church (perhaps we can also say now: the Word *as* church) to be a *verbum efficax*: a creative Word of God which has regained its original force.

4. "The church was silent, when she should have cried out".

A theology which identifies the Word of God with Christ and subsequently considers the church to be its form of existence, ties the performative force of God's Word indissolubly to the pragmatic context of the ecclesiastical community. The tension between the presumed meaning surplus of God's Word and the simultaneous confirmation of the lack of effectivity of human God talk can increase to such an extent, that the theological concept that virtually identifies them is bound to break down. Precisely this is what seems to happen in Bonhoeffer's theology from prison, especially in his Baptism Letter. In the foregoing, we distinguished within a pragmatic situation a personal, an institutional and a historic-cultural level. In his letters from prison we observe how Bonhoeffer affirms the shortcomings of the church on all these three levels. Some illustrations in this respect may be allowed.

On the personal level, a Christian believer should stand for the trustworthiness and the life transforming power of her or his witness. In his "Outline for a Book" however, written in Tegel, Bonhoeffer observes a different behaviour of the common confessing believer: "standing up for the church's cause, but little personal faith in Christ."⁽¹⁸⁾ To Bonhoeffer faith is

not a matter of being intellectually convinced of certain propositions concerning divine reality. According to his opinion, the question "What do we really believe?" needs to be paraphrased as: "I mean, believe in such a way that we stake our lives on it."⁽¹⁹⁾ Christian faith demands total commitment. "To live in the light of the resurrection - that is what Easter means," Bonhoeffer writes to Bethge on the occasion of Eastern 1944. "If a few people really believed that and acted on it in their daily lives, a great deal would be changed." Yet his wish is in vain and he does acknowledge that. In fact he observes a great *perturbatio animorum* among people. They don't actually know what they really live by. And anticipating already verbally his Baptism Letter he states: "It's an unconscious waiting for the word of deliverance, though the time is probably not yet ripe for it to be heard. But the time will come..."⁽²⁰⁾

The church lives out of the story of Jesus, the man for others. In his "Outline for a Book" however, Bonhoeffer observes: "Jesus' is disappearing from sight. (...) The decisive factor: the church in the defensive. No taking risks for others."⁽²¹⁾ Here we meet the second element in the pragmatic context of the church, the institutional framework. Words have to be personally trustworthy, but they must also be sustained and legitimated by social conventions and practices. When the word of deliverance spoken in the pulpit is not supported by a corresponding social structure that liberates people accordingly, it will be spoken in vain. Yet in this regard Bonhoeffer is obviously disappointed in his own Confessing Church. The church showed courage in its fight for room within the totalitarian State. It fortified its own position vis-à-vis the pressures of Nazism. But it failed in its lack of political resistance in favour of others, namely the Jews. Ever since April 1933 - when the so-called "Arierparagraph", which restrained the Jews from holding public office, was introduced - Bonhoeffer spoke up for them. "Open your mouth for the speechless", he used to cite the Proverbs (31.8) during the years of Church Struggle.⁽²²⁾ Beside some efforts of individual members as Bonhoeffer himself, the Confessing Church as a whole did not step into the breach for the Jews. Even for Jewish protestant pastors there was no place left. The demonic process, that started with the Jews' loss of civil rights and ended up with their deportation and annihilation, was not stopped nor even frustrated by the church. The total silence the church kept, the days after the synagogues burned in the Crystal Night (November 10, 1938) represented a sad low point in this regard. In a Confession of Guilt, written in 1940, Bonhoeffer states with grief about his church: "She was silent when she should have cried out because the blood of the innocent was crying about to heaven. She has failed to speak the right word in the right way and at the right time."⁽²³⁾ The church still kept preaching, praying and singing under the Nazism dictature. But Bonhoeffer coined an aphorism in these years. "Only he who shouts for the Jews, is allowed to sing Gregorian."⁽²⁴⁾

Not only faithful personal commitment or institutional trustworthiness, also the sensibility to the historic and cultural situation - the third, more general level of the pragmatic context - is needed in order to speak powerfully about God. Speakers and hearers must want to participate within each other's cultural horizon in order to communicate successfully. That means that they have to acknowledge each other as persons, like "the people they are now". Otherwise their conversation deteriorates into a dialogue between the deaf. The proclamation of the Gospel must submit itself to these conditions, for it is *addressed*. This implies that it knows to whom it is directed. According to Bonhoeffer this condition of cultural sensibility, has not been met by his church. "*People as they are now* simply cannot be religious any more," Bonhoeffer notes in his famous letter of April 30, 1944 (italics added). It is the first one of a sequence of letters in which he explores the contours of the modern world which discloses itself behind the horizon of the war, a world come of age which he questions on its consequences for theology.⁽²⁵⁾ Bonhoeffer foresees a religionless world in which the common words of the church will have become pointless. "The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience - and that means the time of religion in general."⁽²⁶⁾ The theological explorations Bonhoeffer subsequently undertakes in the months to come are just as challenging as they are indefinite. His ambitious program for a religionless interpretation of biblical concepts unfortunately remained unfinished and fragmentary. His intention however is clear. The Word of God cannot be heard in a language which is not understood and spoken by ordinary people. God talk has to be popular, in both senses of the word. Already in *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer had criticized the German Lutheran church for being a bourgeois and elitist institution.⁽²⁷⁾ In prison he radicalizes this criticism. When the masses use a more direct language of body and images instead of the intellectual verbalism, why not speak their tongue, and use their semiotics? God does not express his presence by means of the verbalism of upper class intellectuals only.

Yet Bonhoeffer's cultural diagnosis in his letters from prison only points out a direction. The concepts "coming of age", "religious" and "religionless" - however challenging they might be - perhaps are too ambiguous in view of the complicated cultural scene of post-war Western culture. Postmodernism seems to give room again to religion, although in rather untraditional and hidden forms. Whatever one might hold of Bonhoeffer's sketch of modern culture, however, in any case his intentions turned out to be in diametric opposite to the stance of his church. In his "Outline for a Book" he examines its shortcomings in telegram style: "The Protestant church: Pietism as a last attempt to maintain evangelical Christianity as a religion; Lutheran orthodoxy, the attempt to rescue the church as an institution for salvation;

the Confessing Church: the theology of revelation; a *dos moi pou stoi* over against the world (...) Sociologically: no effect on the masses - interest confined to the upper and lower middle class. A heavy incubus of difficult traditional ideas."⁽²⁸⁾ The church is obviously missing what Bonhoeffer himself considers to be a necessary condition for any competent speech of God: a contextual hermeneutics of culture.

5. A new language?

What does this mean for Christian preaching? It seems clear that the liberating "new language" Bonhoeffer envisions in his Baptism Letter implies more than an alternative theological semantics. The apparent lack of forceful meaning of the Gospel is basically - though perhaps not exclusively - located in the pragmatic setting of its proclamation. The story told by the church will only be experienced as credible if the church itself and its members turn out to be standing by their cause. Hermeneutics and ethics in Bonhoeffer, though not to be identified easily, are indissolubly intertwined.

Does not Bonhoeffer in his high-tensioned ecclesiology expect too much of the church? Perhaps he does. In order to prevent any more huge frustrations and disappointments he might have adopted another ecclesiology and reconsider his concept of church. Why not stress more expressively the fact that the church is a *corpus permixtum* of saints and sinners? Why not found ecclesiology in a far more free manner in pneumatology instead of in that very demanding concept of *Christus praesens*? The relationship between Christ and the believer would be released from that risky and too-much-demanding identification. Yet instead of changing his church concept, Bonhoeffer prefers to maintain it, but he does so by radicalizing his original view on God-talk. His clear insight in the weakness of the church's speech about God conducts him in prison not to a less demanding ecclesiology, but rather to a renewed evaluation and re-estimation of the language of silence. In this Bonhoeffer remains within the central presupposition of Word theology, as adopted by him in 1925: God reveals himself concretely in human language, his Word is to be spoken by human beings. However, the fact that human language has actually eluded its performative force, does not mean that God himself is condemned to stay speechless forever. Bonhoeffer's theology is far too much Christ-centered to give room to that idea. Christ is the Logos of God and He stays that. A God who keeps silent from now on would be equal to a God undoing the incarnation.

In this manner, Bonhoeffer consciously construes an aporetic tension between the actual impoverishment of the church's God talk and his ongoing belief in the abundance of God's creative power. His prevailing *Christus*

praesens-ecclesiology keeps him from searching an easy solution. On the contrary, it leads him to a strong emphasis on the act of silent waiting as the outstanding Christian attitude. "Until God's Word is spoken as a new language," the Baptism Letter concludes, "the Christian cause will be a silent and hidden affair, but there will be those who pray and do right and wait for God's own time."⁽²⁹⁾

In this accent on keeping silence Bonhoeffer draws on insights which he developed much earlier. To Bonhoeffer keeping silence shows not to be the expression of some accidental embarrassment, but rather the basic Christian attitude vis-à-vis the living God. To Bonhoeffer silence is the dialectical counterpart of a speaking God, not the consequence of his taciturnity. Consequently he opens his lecture on *Christology*, which extensively takes up the concept of Christ as Logos, as follows: "Be silent, it is the Absolute! (Kierkegaard) (...) The silence of the church is silence before the Word. (...) Speaking about Christ means being silent, being silent about Christ, means speaking. The appropriate speaking of the church that originates in an appropriate silence is proclamation of Christ."⁽³⁰⁾ Also in *Life Together*, the fruit of the spiritual experiment in Finkenwalde written in 1938, we find penetrating sections on the theological role of keeping silence. There we can read for example: "Silence is nothing else but waiting for God's Word and coming from God's Word with a blessing. (...) The silence of a Christian is listening silence, humble stillness, that may be interrupted at any time for the sake of humility. It is silence in conjunction with the Word."⁽³¹⁾ To Bonhoeffer being silent before God is an equivalent of persistent and attentive listening. This vigilant way of being silent in the absence of the speaking God he once called "qualified".⁽³²⁾

We can observe the same qualified sense of the concept of silence returning in the Baptism Letter, although this time no longer as a spiritual exercise of the individual believer as in Finkenwalde, but as the strategy of the church as a whole. Bonhoeffer's plea for a renewed introduction of the *disciplina arcani*, the secret discipline of the church in its first centuries, elsewhere in his letters from prison, has to be situated in this context as well.⁽³³⁾ The Christian attitude Bonhoeffer supports represents a paradoxical combination of passivity (waiting for God) and activity (praying and doing good). It means a stretching out of one's whole existence towards God and the neighbour; here, mysticism and ethics intertwine.⁽³⁴⁾ 'God' appears to be no more - if He ever was - available. His transforming presence can no longer be invoked on call. The only way we can meet Him is by embracing unconditionally the world he created, and take part in its ongoing struggle for justice and peace. This stance represents at the same time an act of faith and repentance. The act of "praying and doing good" expresses the total submission to and approval of this religious dispossession. Under these conditions there is only

one way left to be religious; it is in recognizing that one can be no longer religious in the traditional sense of that word. To Bonhoeffer, the only good Christian is a "worldly" Christian, who takes, without reservation, her or his responsibilities in building up a just and human society.

This high-tensioned theology from prison cannot be explained without using paradoxes. Certainly Bonhoeffer could have avoided them, by leaving his embarrassments aside and constructing a far more 'easy' theology. A theology in which the absence of God does not represent the reverse side of his powerful presence, but simply his eternal essence. A theology in which the only thing one can tell about God is that there is nothing to tell about him. A theology in which the church constitutes at most a religious association and not the body of Christ, the Logos of God in this world. Yet Bonhoeffer sticks to his basic intuitions until the end. Because he was a stubborn German? I rather think it was because he had learned from Luther that good Christian theology is *theologia crucis*. A theology which remains *logos* about God, but is born out of despair ("Anfechtung") about his hiddenness. In this theology, God is believed to reveal his strength in the midst of human weakness.

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Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Enlarged Edition, London: SCM Press, 1971, pp. 294 - 300.
2. Ibid. p. 279.
3. Ibid., p. 295.
4. Ibid. pp. 299 - 300.
5. A *constative* speech act refers to an existing state of affairs. It describes the reality of what is the case. On the other hand, a *performative* speech act creates reality that did not exist before. Opening or closing a meeting, baptizing a child (or an ocean steamer), judging a criminal or a student, are common examples. Promising represents a significant performative activity. Promises create a relationship of mutual expectations and obligations which did not exist before the promise was pronounced. It is 'a performance of an act *in saying something*' (J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 1975 (2nd ed.), pp. 99 - 100; Cf. J.R. Searle, *Speech acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp. 22 ff.)

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche* (1927), München: Chr. Kaiser, 1986, Joachim von Soosten (ed.), (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 1), p. 159.

7. For a close and elaborate description of the Barth-Bonhoeffer relationship, cf. recently Charles Marsh: *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of his Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 7 - 33.

8. "Referat über historische und pneumatische Schriftauslegung" (1925), in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Jugend und Studium, 1918 -1926*, H. Pfeifer (ed.), München: Chr. Kaiser, 1986 (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 9), pp. 305 - 324, p. 312.

9. "Die Geschichte der systematische Theologie des 20. Jahrhunderts" (1931/32), in: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt 1931 - 1932*, E. Amelung / C. Strohm (eds.) München: Chr. Kaiser, 1994 (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 11), pp. 140 - 213, p. 199.

10. Ibid., p. 199.

11. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Akt und Sein: Transzendentalphilosophie und Ontologie in der systematischen Theologie* (1931), H.-R. Reuter (ed.), München: Chr. Kaiser, 1988 (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 2), p. 85.

12. Ibid., p. 109.

13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Schöpfung und Fall* (1933), M. Rüter / I. Tödt (eds.), München: Chr. Kaiser, 1989 (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 3), pp. 38 - 40. Cf. p. 39, note 7, referring to Ps. 33:9: "Das Wort selbst ist die Tat."

14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Christologie" (1933), in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. III, Eberhard Bethge (ed.), München: Chr. Kaiser, 1966, pp. 166 - 242, p. 188.

15. Ibid., p. 193.

16. Cf. Barth's theory of 'the Word of God in its threefold form', Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. I/1, (Zollikon: Zürich, 1932), par. 4.

17. "Finkenwalder Homiletik" (1935 - 1939), in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV, E. Bethge (ed.), München: Chr. Kaiser, 1975, pp. 237 - 289, p. 252.

18. *Letters and Papers*, p. 381.
19. Ibid. ("Outline for a Book"), p. 382.
20. Ibid., pp. 240 - 241 (Letter from March 25, 1944).
21. Ibid. ("Outline for a Book"), p. 381.
22. Cf. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie*, München: Chr. Kaiser, 1967, pp. 323, 474, 559, 596, 603. Cf. also *Gesammelte Schriften*, E. Bethge (ed.), München: Chr. Kaiser 1958ff., vol. I, p. 42; vol. II, pp. 144, 415; vol. III, pp. 323 - 324; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, M. Kuske / I. Tödt (eds.), München: Chr. Kaiser, 1989, (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 4), p. 253.
23. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1995, p. 113. Compare as a striking contrast Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, London: SCM Press 1954, p. 60: "But silence before the Word leads to right hearing and thus also to right speaking of the Word of God at the right time. Much that is unnecessary remains unsaid. But the essential and the helpful thing can be said in a few words."
24. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 506.
25. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, p. 279.
26. Ibid.
27. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, pp. 299ff.
28. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, p. 381.
29. Ibid., p.300.
30. Bonhoeffer, "Christologie", p. 167.
31. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 60.
32. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Zur theologische Begründung der Weltbundarbeit" (1932), in: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 11, pp. 327 - 344, p. 330, p. 334.
33. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, pp. 281, 286, 300.
34. Cf. Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, London: Routledge, 1951 (*Attente de Dieu*, 1942).

