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Herausgegeben von
Stephen Plant (Cambridge),
Christiane Tietz (Mainz),
Ralf K. Wüstenberg (Flensburg),
Jens Zimmermann (British Columbia)

Ralf K. Wüstenberg / Jens Zimmermann (eds.)

God Speaks to Us

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Biblical Hermeneutics

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 PETER LANG
EDITION

Paul R. Hinlicky

Verbum Externum: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Bethel Confession*

Introduction

There is reason today to remember the Bethel Confession (hereafter BC), Dietrich Bonhoeffer's aborted project for the renewal of the 16th Century Reformation confession against the German Christian heresy. In August of 1933 Bonhoeffer directed a working group on this project along with Hermann Sasse and in large part authored the document.¹ In the words of Walter Sparr, Bonhoeffer "pleaded for a contemporary updating of the traditional Confessions, and for the never-ending process of interpretation and appropriation of Holy Scripture relying on its self-interpretation – *non vi sed verbo*. He himself initiated a new confession, the Bethel Confession [...]"² Klaus Scholder wrote in 1977: "the original version of the BC re-

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¹ This study is limited to the August redrafting of an initial outline by Bonhoeffer and Sasse, which for convenience we will simply call "the Bethel Confession." The two versions are printed side-by-side in English translation in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Berlin: 1932–1933*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 12 ed. L. Rasmussen, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009, 374–424 and all quotations of the BC are taken from this edition. Christine-Ruth Müller, *Bekennnis und Bekennen: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Bethel (1933): Ein lutherischer Versuch*, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag 1989 provides the German texts of all four versions (81–193). Guy Christopher Carter, *Confession at Bethel, August 1933 – enduring witness: The formation, revision and significance of the first full theological confession of the Evangelical Church struggle in Nazi Germany*, Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University 1987, provides an English translation of all four versions, 304–339.

² Walter Sparr, "Discovering the Presence of Christ in the World: A Response to Wolfgang Klausnitzer [1]" *Ecclesiology* 2:2, 2006, 170.

mains a brilliant, sharp and impressive witness to what theological work was still capable of achieving in summer 1933. Ponderous though it was and loaded with numerous passages from the Bible, from Luther, and above all from confessional texts, this confession was nevertheless theologically and politically clearer and more exact in some passages than the famous Barmen declaration of May, 1934.³ In 1987, Guy Carter wrote a pioneering source-critical dissertation which unraveled the various authorships involved in the August collaboration; he then traced the impact of criticism, solicited unbeknownst to Bonhoeffer after August from a range of readers, on further revisions made by others in November and January. This process and its results caused Bonhoeffer to disown the final product.⁴ Carter demonstrated how in this way “some critics standing ideologically close to Nazism undercut the original theological content and churchly protest.”⁵ Throughout Carter argued that the original BC has a claim on theology as an “enduring witness,” even as it reveals a Bonhoeffer steeped in the theological tradition of Luther. This is especially the case in regard to the BC’s statements on the

³ Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich, Vol. One: 1918–1934* trans. J. Bowden. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988, 456.

⁴ As Guy Carter has noted to me in personal correspondence (9/27/11), Bonhoeffer’s objection to further revision first of all concerned the delay it involved, as he and Sasse wanted their document printed in time for the forthcoming assembly of the German Evangelical Church in Wittenberg at the end of September.

⁵ Carter, 281. Carter would express himself in a more nuanced way today: “I do not believe that Adolf or Theodore Schlatter were Nazis [...] Unlike Bonhoeffer and the BC, these opportunists never realized until it was too late, and some never at all, that the new regime possessed and was possessed by its own spirit, and that its program, quite apart from *positives Christentum*, would prove to be utterly contemptuously destructive of Christian values and of the Church herself;” Personal Correspondence, July 9, 2011. See further Guy Carter, “Martin Luther in the Third Reich: Recent Research on Luther as Iconic Force in Hitler’s Germany,” *Seminary Ridge Review* 12:1, Autumn, 2009, 42–62. In this essay, Carter draws on the empirically rich but theologically confused Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Steigmann-Gall examines all who self-identify as Christians; the weakness of this pure empiricism is that he disregards the theologically normative claims by which theologians like Barth, Bonhoeffer and Sasse defined German Christianity as heretical. This produces a host of Nazis who viewed themselves as Christian, ironically, by means of the liberal Protestant rejection of the categories of orthodoxy and heresy which had first made German Christianity a plausibly Christian possibility in the first place.

Word of God as Scripture and its practice of theology as Scriptural interpretation for the purpose of public confession. To this end, Bonhoeffer drew upon Luther’s principle of the *verbum externum* against “enthusiasm,” as we shall explore in some detail.

Continuing today with the project of Bonhoeffer’s BC would entail a new appropriation of the *apocalyptic* notion of “confessing” theology at the root of Luther’s own approach:⁶ not merely a conservative reiteration of a dogmatic formulation from the past (as we might think under the term, “confessionalism” or “confessional theology”), but conceiving the discipline of theology itself, including its appropriation of past confession, as the contemporary human witness of the Word of God in the *latter’s* struggle against anti-divine powers.⁷ Hence I argue in this essay that Bonhoeffer’s conception of the theological task manifest in the BC is neither liberal nor neo-orthodox, but something that synthesizes the strengths of both theological approaches. In subtle distinction from Barth, and in continuity with the 19th Century, it entails *mediation*, what Bonhoeffer eventually and provocatively tagged as the “non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts.” With Barth and against the 19th Century, however, this hermeneutical mediation of the Biblical witness to Christ crucified for the Euro-American audience of humanity come of age (not its recasting according to the latter’s perceived needs, least of all their “religious” ones!) would be undertaken so that God’s controversy with the world and God’s reconciliation with it may be articulated into the present situation.

In order to make this argument, we will have to discern how retrieving the BC offers helpful correctives to problematic aspects or tendencies of the

⁶ Paul R. Hinlicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2010, 31–35.

⁷ From the time of the church struggle see the essay by Günther Bornkamm on Matthew 10:323 / Luke 12:8–9, “Das Wort Jesu vom Bekennen,” in: *Geschichte und Glaube*, Erster Teil, Gesammelte Aufsätze, Band III, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag 1968. See further Paul R. Hinlicky, “Confession: A New Look at Some Old Theology,” *Academy: Lutherans in Profession* 1983: XXXIX, 57–80; “Status Confessionis,” *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Vol. 5, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans & Leiden: Brill 2008, 198–201; “The New Language of the Spirit: Critical Dogmatics in the Tradition of Luther,” Chapter Three, D. Bielfeldt, M. Mattox, & P. Hinlicky, *The Substance of the Faith: Luther’s Doctrinal Theology for Today*. Minneapolis: Fortress 2008, 131–190.

more famous Barmen Declaration⁸ (but also to problematic criticisms of Barmen).⁹ Like Barmen the BC spoke not from a secular-liberal or progressive political perspective of universal human rights, but from the perspective of traditional Protestant Christian theology based on Scripture read as a canonical whole. Likewise, in terms of the relation of church and state, the BC differed little from Barmen, which also made a “two kingdoms” differentiation of powers.¹⁰ It is true that the BC still expressed traditional Christian supercessionism regarding Judaism,¹¹ and in this aspect remains problematic for us today. Nonetheless, unlike Barmen, the tragically aborted BC named the Jews in order to rule out violence against them¹² just as it also mandated ecclesial solidarity with persecuted Jewish Christians.

Already this set of complications regarding the relation between the BC and the Barmen Declaration constitutes a warning about what may be called the “retrospective fallacy.” In order to see how Bonhoeffer’s retrieval of Luther is a critique of contemporaneous Lutheranism, and further, to retrace the post-war career of the Barmen Declaration through the vicissitudes of “political Barthianism” to contemporary “political theology,” and finally to see in this light the BC as a helpful alternative which combines

⁸ Robert W. Bertram, “Bonhoeffer’s ‘Battle(s) for Christendom’: His ‘Responsible Interpretation’ of Barmen,” Chapter Five, in: *A Time for Confessing* ed. by M. Hoy, Lutheran Quarterly Books, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008, 65–95. Bertram concedes that the “Dahlemites,” Niemöller and Barth (and Bonhoeffer) were “no doubt” right that in matters of doctrine and life the church alone is to judge and decide; yet, he asks in the name of the “intact” Lutheran churches in the south of Germany in the 1930s, “must it win its independence at the cost of becoming exclusive and sectarian, no longer a church of the people?” Continuing in dialectical fashion, Bertram then asked: “But if a church of the people, [is it] also of the people’s political aspirations?” (74). These are the difficult questions which have persisted regarding Barmen’s legacy.

⁹ Carter, 78. On Bonhoeffer’s Lutheranism, see “The Impact of Luther,” Chapter Three in: James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer’s Theology: Classical and Revolutionary*. Nashville: Abingdon 1970, 72–88.

¹⁰ Bertram, 69.

¹¹ “The place of the Old Testament people of the covenant has been taken not by another nation but rather by the Christian church, called out of, and within, the nations.”

¹² To be sure, with all the ambivalence of traditional Christian anti-Judaism: “It can never in any case be the mission of any nation to take revenge on the Jews for the murder committed at Golgotha.”

hermeneutical theology with political engagement, we must first reflect on who we are today and why we might appropriate anew the BC’s project.

The salience of this reflection is nicely captured by the contemporary American evangelical theologian Timothy George, who criticizes then General Secretary of the World Council of Churches Konrad Raiser’s anti-theological summons in 1995 for the “urgent reordering of the ecumenical agenda away from old doctrinal disputes and unresolvable arguments of the past toward more urgent contemporary issues such as justice, peace and concern for the environment.” Against Raiser’s erection of a false antithesis, George joined with those voices which have expressed “disquiet and deep concern over what appeared to be the loss of theological substance and Christocentric commitment.”¹³ To articulate this dissent, George invoked – in a fascinating parallel, as we shall see, to the Trinitarian argument of the BC against German Christian enthusiasm – the 1991 dissent of the Orthodox theologians at the Canberra assembly of the World Council of Churches: “We must guard against a tendency to substitute a ‘private’ spirit, the spirit of the world or other spirits for the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son. Our tradition is rich in respect to local and national cultures, but we find it impossible to invoke the spirits of ‘earth, air, water and sea creatures.’ Pneumatology is inseparable from Christology or from the doctrine of the Holy Trinity confessed by the church on the basis of divine revelation.”¹⁴ Raiser’s summons to leave theology behind for the sake of political engagement, in this light, fails to draw any of the necessary lessons. The “positive Christianity” of the Nazi Party Platform and of the “anti-doctrinal” German Christian movement¹⁵ would be quite at home with Raiser in rejecting the labor of ecumenical and dogmatic theology, in which Bonhoeffer orientated his appropriation of Luther, by the identical tact of a ballyhooing a liberating political and putatively progressive engagement. Bonhoeffer’s resistance to Nazism is theological or it is nothing at all. And that is not least of all the reason why the BC deserves renewed attention today.

¹³ Timothy George, “Evangelicals and the Present Ecumenical Moment,” in: *Critical Issues in Ecclesiology: Essays in Honor of Carl E. Braaten* ed. by Alberto L. Garcia and Susan K. Wood. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2011, 60f.

¹⁴ Ibid, 61, cited from *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report Seventh Assembly*, ed. by Michael Kinnamon, Geneva: WCC Publications 1991, 281.

¹⁵ See especially Bergen, Doris L., *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press 1996.

Reflecting then on our own contemporary stances along these fault lines, we will be able better to recognize and appreciate the distinctive features of the BC's doctrine of Scripture and the relation it claims to the Reformation legacy – as well as to the self-conscious modernity-cum-progressivity of the German Christian claim in the 1930s. Then we will be in a position to discern the precise ways in which the Barmen Declaration eclipsed the BC but also ways in which the BC might provide correctives to Barmen.¹⁶ We will conclude with some reflections on what is required theologically for carrying on the project of the BC today.

The Retrospective Fallacy

In order to retrieve a forgotten possibility and continue it today, one must recover a sense of the contingency of events which did not lead inevitably to the outcome which we, in the present, so certainly know. Only in this light do we appreciate the actual choices made by past actors who did not know the future. In turn, this attention to the real historicity of the past causes us to reflect on ourselves and our interest in lost possibilities. We today become interested in historical “failures” – i.e., those who did not know success in convincing contemporaries in their own time – who nevertheless in hindsight appear as “successes” for discerning and resisting the demonic bewitchment that prevailed over contemporaries.¹⁷ It should be evident:

¹⁶ I am referring to the problem of post-war “political Barthianism” and the degree to which it became an inverted, left-wing image of the disgraced “German Christian” opponent, “leaping” left rather than right into an unmediated, direct claim to political obedience by divine command. To raise this problem is not to advocate any return to theology “thinking in terms of two spheres,” but rather to argue for politically engaged theology as a critical task of discerning mediation. See Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, 118–134. Hockenos does not sufficiently consider the irony that “political Barthianism” succumbed to complacency and complicity regarding Stalinism and in this way in fact became the inverted image of the disgraced German Christians.

¹⁷ Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint*. Minneapolis: Fortress 2004. In this instructive study of appropriations of Bonhoeffer (radical, liberal, conservative, and secular-universalist), it is striking that Bonhoeffer's *Lutheranism* goes so little noticed. This is a function of the post-

the theological witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer remains important to us, not only because of its intrinsic merits, but because of the way history turned out. Christians find in his personal integration of witness and theology¹⁸ a light shining in a very dark time, a time which now, “after Auschwitz” as Richard Rubenstein famously put it, has shaken traditional convictions to the core (Bonhoeffer's included).¹⁹ Yet already *before* Auschwitz Bonhoeffer's theology was making the prophetic critique of inwardness and self-transcendence, which is what he meant by the term, “religion;” he did so in the name of, and for the sake of, a profounder grasp of the coming into the flesh of the biblical God to redeem the creation.²⁰ Precisely this prophetic critique and apostolic ministry of reconciliation, the law and the gospel, figured in the crucified and risen Christ, is what the Bible is about for Bonhoeffer; this material insight into the dialectical content of critique and reconciliation in Christ provides as well the standard of the Bible's right use to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. We cannot but think in retrospect that had his theological witness prevailed in time, surely it would have extended the scope of concern beyond the narrow confines of the sanctuary walls, as it did in Bonhoeffer's own case; surely it would have inoculated the German church from the siren song of Hitlerism and stiffened resistance, as it did in Bonhoeffer himself. Such wistful thoughts attract us to Bonhoeffer. Surely they should, so far as they go.

war antagonism between the restoring German Lutheran establishment and the political Barthians, neither of which knew what to do with Bonhoeffer's kind of evangelical-catholic Lutheranism, focused on the *Verbum externum* rather than an antagonistic law-gospel dualism.

- ¹⁸ Paul Barz, *I am Bonhoeffer – A Credible Life. – A Novel* trans. D.W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress 2008.
- ¹⁹ Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*. Indianapolis 1966.
- ²⁰ As Ralf Wüstenberg has shown, the notion of “non-religious interpretation of the biblical concepts” from Bonhoeffer's late Tegel theology is in deep continuity with Bonhoeffer's earlier Christocentric theology. “From the concept of faith defined as participation in the being of Jesus, Bonhoeffer deduces the concept of life as being there for others. Life is ontologically linked with Christology through faith [...] “Nonreligious” interpretation means a form of interpretation by which modern life that has come of age in the modern era and Christian faith are brought together in a new relation.” Ralf K. Wüstenberg, “Bonhoeffer's Tegel Theology,” in: *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition* ed. J.W. de Gruchy, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 70f.

Yet this very light can mislead. It can deceive us just because we, unlike the actors of the 1930s in Germany, know the outcome of events; we know that 1933 in Germany was the beginning of a very dark time. That was not the general knowledge of the time, which, quite to the contrary, welcomed National Socialism as the bright path forward between capitalism and the chaos of parliamentarianism on the one side and bloody, totalitarian Bolshevism on the other. Knowing what came of this welcome of Hitlerism, as we do, we naively wonder why so few saw with clarity that the National Socialist “turn” would come to nothing good, that “coordination” of the church with Nazism would devour not only her but many others. We might go so far in our incomprehension even to chastise Bonhoeffer himself for episodes of confusion and doubt, accusing him in all high-minded seriousness of failing to be where we are today *after* Auschwitz.²¹ Such anachronistic posturing teaches us little; it merely confirms us in what we already know from our privileged after-the-fact position. We are guilty here of a hermeneutical error, of a retrospective fallacy. We gain nothing from the past – nothing from lonely Bonhoeffer’s theological way against a juggernaut – until imaginatively we enter his time *before* Auschwitz, retracing his steps in all the uncertainty and risk that actually accompanied them.²²

²¹ “Examples abound of anti-Nazi religious discourse in which “Jew” and “Jewish” function as terms of contempt. In *The Bethel Confession* of 1933, the earliest confessors designated the racialist notion that Jewish Christians should be segregated from Gentile believers “Judaistic heresy.” Stephen R. Haynes, “Who Needs Enemies? Jews and Judaism in Anti-Nazi Religious Discourse,” in: *Church History* 71:2 (June, 2002) 355–6. To be sure, the BC’s invocation of the familiar Pauline trope from the ancient controversy in Galatia *was* anti-Nazi discourse, as Haynes finally concedes: “Thus, in the 1930s both National Socialists and their Christian opponents exploited images of the “Eternal Jew,” the Nazis to portray Jews as alien and rootless, Christians to explain their suffering and express hope in their final redemption. Bonhoeffer’s religious wayfarer and the Nazis’ racial outsider were not one and the same. But the formal similarities were very real” (362). That amounts to a purely “formal” observation. Haynes, incidentally, concedes that this line of thought met a hostile reaction at the 1995 meeting of the International Bonhoeffer society (*Phenomenon*, 175), a reception which spurred him to the more sophisticated analysis of his book.

²² Theodore S. Hamerow, *Why We Watched: Europe, America and the Holocaust*. NY & London: Norton, 2008. See also forthcoming Paul R. Hinlicky, *Before Auschwitz: What Christian Theology Must Learn from the Rise of Nazism*. Eugene, OR: Cascade 2013).

One hastens to add: the point of refusing to indulge the fallacy of hindsight is hardly to justify, mitigate or normalize the heinous crimes of the Nazi regime, or the collaboration, active and passive, of the Christian churches in them, nor least of all to rationalize traditional Christian anti-Judaism. Rather, the point is to understand by this exercise in historical imagination how uncomfortably close *we today remain* to options in Bible and theology which welcomed, aided and abetted that supposed middle way between Liberalism and Bolshevism which was National Socialism.

The BC provides an opportunity for this exercise in historical imagination, if we can avoid the retrospective fallacy. In a letter from the end of October, Bonhoeffer’s candid admission so directs our attention: “the Bethel Confession, on which I really worked so passionately, met with almost no understanding at all.”²³ This acknowledgment is doubly revealing. It reveals Bonhoeffer’s wholehearted effort in the BC, his theological ownership of the project; but it also reveals that the product of his collaboration with Sasse and others met with little sympathy among readers to whom the August draft was distributed for comment. The dissonance reported by Bonhoeffer is what should attract our attention, if we would actually learn something from the past. This incomprehension of the BC by contemporaries poses the historical-hermeneutical question with some precision. Why was Bonhoeffer’s rigorous appeal to and consequent application of the Reformation’s *verbum externum* incomprehensible to Biblicist pietists like Adolph Schlatter? How did it come about that its critical power over against the theology of the so-called “orders of creation” was mitigated, if not utterly defanged, in the final draft that appeared in January 1934?

We will answer this question in the immediately following section. We can now conclude this reflection on the retrospective fallacy by noting that the incomprehension of Bonhoeffer’s “modern confession of faith”²⁴ was so profound that the BC would never have emerged from historical obscurity at all, but for the retrospective discovery of Bonhoeffer and his significance *after* Auschwitz.²⁵ This is so for two reasons.

²³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928–1936* trans. E. H. Robertson & J. Bowden. NY & Evanston: Harper & Row 1965, 236.

²⁴ Scholder, 436.

²⁵ So Robert P. Ericksen: Bonhoeffer “occupies a relatively rare place in publishing” and study of him is “well worth the trouble, on two counts. His life story is one of Christian courage and ethical acumen in response to Hitler and the Holocaust

First, redrafted in November under the influence of critiques by the Schlatters and others, and eventually published under Niemoeller's signature in January 1934 under another title ("The Confession of the Fathers and the Confessing Community"), the final version was sufficiently compromised that Bonhoeffer disowned it.²⁶ Amid a flood of similar statements at the time, the published version was quickly forgotten as verbose, dense, and the vain pursuit of a nominally Lutheran consensus open to the concerns of the German Christian party for *völkisch* existence. Of course, only an insider like Bonhoeffer would have known that the denunciation of violence against Jews and pledge of solidarity with persecuted Jewish Christians had been edited out. In comparison to the August draft one finds a stridently anti-ecumenical tone, harshly differentiating Lutheranism from Catholic heresies and Reformed deficiencies. In addition, there is expansive and complicated teaching on the "orders of creation," including a soft recognition of racial order. In short, a concern for a balanced dialectic that would mediate between the Lutheran establishment and the National Socialist revolution replaced the August draft's dogmatic sharp edge against the German Christian movement as heresy. Bonhoeffer's BC, by contrast, had been a point by point argumentative *dispute* with the heretical theology of the German Christians on the basis of the Bible understood according to classic Lutheran confessional writings of the 16th century. But known of this was made known at the time.

Second, the BC was eclipsed by the Barmen Declaration which emerged in the following May of 1934 to ally Lutheran, United and Reformed Protestants under a concise Christologically-focused declaration; Barmen became the manifesto of the church struggle which ever since has dominated memory of the 1930s church struggle. Until Bethge published the August draft of the BC in Bonhoeffer's collected writings in 1959, few recalled the project at all.

[...] Bonhoeffer's rare voice in opposition [...] has an important place in the history of that period. Additionally, Bonhoeffer's writing increasingly became available and grew in stature during the postwar years [...]" Review of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works*, Vol. 12 in *Catholic Historical Review* 97:2, April, 2011, 386f.

²⁶ In a letter which arrived at Bethel around November 24, 1933 and was apparently destroyed by fire during the war, see Carter 151f.

The BC's Doctrine of Scripture

Critically aware of these retrospective conditions of our knowledge, we may now turn to the doctrine of Scripture and conception of theology as confession that may be retrieved from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's BC.²⁷ The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are straight off declared "sole source and measure of the doctrine of the church," yet not, as in Protestant Orthodoxy, because they are miraculously given as an inerrant text. Rather, their authority is grounded in their unique historical role as human "witness" to the revelation of God, Jesus Christ, the Person who is the Word-made-flesh, crucified and risen from the dead and thus present to faith. "Witness" to Christ – taken as the Spirit-wrought and forensic act of "confession" as upon the witness stand – is the key concept here. "In bearing *witness* to these acts of God, the Scriptures are God's word to us. The church can only proclaim God's revelation by interpreting this word, which bears *witness* to it" (emphasis added). No doubt, this formulation is indebted to Karl Barth's dialectical theology which had also argued that the human word of the Bible becomes God's Word where and when it pleases God. Yet further, because both Biblical and contemporary witness is and remains a human word spoken in history, contemporary witness ever requires appropriating *interpretation* of the Biblical witness in order to speak the *right* and *timely* word of God against the anti-divine powers *in the present time of trial*. The act of confession as an act of faith involves contemporaries in the reception and articulation of the biblical witness which it appropriates. Thus

²⁷ In a yet to be published paper, Christine Helmer calls attention to Oswald Bayer's important study of the reception-history of the Barmen Declaration in the latter's *Theologie*, Handbuch Systematischer Theologie 1 (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994) 336–79. On the one hand, Barmen united Lutherans and Reformed Christologically in their resistance to the German Christians; on the other hand it has ever since divided them Christologically, since Lutherans see in Jesus Christ not one Word of God, but two Words, the Law and the Gospel, which are in dialectical tension with each other (even dualistically in contradiction according to some, e.g., Werner Elert, according to Helmer). Helmer urges us to see how anachronistic a framework for understanding Luther's theology is created by such pitting of Barthian system (coherence based on one principle) against Lutheran anti-system (contradictory words which cannot be synthesized this side of the eschaton). She also cautions against the "exclusive Christological focus on the word" which does not "address other areas of Christ's rule outside the church" with reference to Michael Welker's article referenced in note 44 below.

the witness of faith is always *mediated by interpretation* in a concrete situation to a specific audience. Just such interpretation is what confessing theology entails as a disciplined discourse. The proclamation of God's Word as witnessed biblically and at the same time its interpretation theologically for the sake of contemporary confession form a dynamic whole.

This quiet shift from verbal inerrancy to biblical witness and confessing theology has profound implications. The Bible is not put forward as some miraculous alternative to science and philosophy; rather the crucified and risen Christ is understood and confessed as the present One in whom the controversy of God with the fallen creation is prosecuted and reconciled. In a fresh and disturbing way, therefore, this controversial Christ becomes the hermeneutical key of the "one time, unrepeatable and self-contained history of salvation," the Genesis-to-Revelation Biblical canon. Conversely, Christ can be known this way, as reconciliation with God, only when the Bible is taken as a whole, since indispensably it is from the Hebrew prophets that we learn that God's revelation is to be conceived as controversial, a trial, a contention with the world for the sake of the world, even against the church for the sake of the church. God's Word is both prophetic critique and apostolic reconciliation; it is both of these distinct words, yet never one without the other, a living, dynamic whole pressing into the here-and-now in the figure of the crucified and risen Christ, who is confessed or denied in the *krisis* of the world. Contemporary interpretation, therefore, continues the prophetic controversy of God with the world. It does not find something in the past and leave it there. Through the controversial actions of hearing/interpreting/confessing-witnessing, the canonical "salvation history" comes into the present to work judgment and pardon. Certainly we have a hermeneutical circle. The unity of the Scriptural witness is found in this controversial Christ and He in turn is the One who "speaks throughout the Scriptures." But this hermeneutical circle is not vicious when we see that its sense is to break forth from the circle to require concrete confession of Christ in the contested contemporary situation. How does that work?

The insistent emphasis of the BC is on Christ as the unity of the Testaments in the wholeness of Scripture. This unity of New Testament with Hebrew Scriptures has an indispensable function. It assures that the New Testament message is understood as answering the prophetic questions framed by the Old Testament. Thus the Gospel is not captured and remade into the instrument of some other framework, as the German Christians

wanted, who were forthrightly demanding the "coordination" of the Christian message with the National Socialist revolution by decoupling Christ from the prophetic legacy of Judaism. Against this separation, the BC insists on the unity of Scripture to ensure that "we are not the judge of God's word in the Bible; instead, the Bible is given to us so that we may submit to Christ's judgment" in the prophetic critique. In its penultimate article on "The Church and the Jews," the BC concretely aims at just such an act of obedient *martyria* at the present hour: "The Christians who are of Gentile descent must be prepared to expose themselves to persecution before they are ready to betray in even a single case, voluntarily or under compulsion, the church's fellowship with Jewish Christians that is instituted in word and sacrament."

Such a contemporary judgment is the goal of confession, and it is binding because "the Holy Spirit that speaks to us through a word in the Holy Scriptures is always the spirit of the whole of Holy Scriptures and thus can never be confused with one's own pious experience in selecting whatever one pleases" – or deselecting what one pleases, such as, for example, in the de-Judaizing of the Bible and the Church's ministry demanded by the German Christians. Luther's *was Christum treibet* "does not give us room to arbitrarily choose whatever we want from the Scriptures." On the contrary, for Luther it is precisely the prophetic word of the Old Testament which necessitates the crucified Messiah as the reconciliation of the world fallen under its holy judgment. Thus Luther's famous exegetical principle tells how we are to receive the whole of the Scriptures: "the essence of the Reformation is consciousness of the Holy Scriptures, submission to the Holy Scriptures. For the Reformation, Martin Luther is the teacher who is obedient to the Holy Scriptures."

Perhaps surprisingly, there is no paragraph devoted to the shibboleth of modern Lutheran theology, a putative dualistic antagonism between the law and the gospel. Bonhoeffer and Sasse appear rather to coordinate law and gospel with Luther's purpose clause: God wounds *in order* to heal, God afflicts *in order* to comfort, God kills *in order* to make alive.²⁸ That coordination of law and gospel would accord with the argumentative burden in

²⁸ See Paul R. Hinlicky, "Luther and Heidegger: A Review Essay of Benjamin D. Crowe, Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity," in: *Lutheran Quarterly* Vol. XXII, No.1, 2008, 78–86.

the BC to lift up the law of Israel, the Ten Commandments, as God's own law in distinction from the *nomoi* of the nations, the so-called "orders of creation" or the natural law of Roman Catholic social teaching. Likewise, while the BC's article on Justification and Faith affirms the central Lutheran conviction that "faith clings solely to the biblical word of the promise of God's grace," it immediately and pointedly protests against "the confusion of trust in God with faith," i.e. the confusion of the "heathen fatalism" of heroic Fascist will-power with the eschatological belief "that at the end of all things God will create a new heaven and a new earth," indeed "our earth that will be made new, the same earth on which the cross of Christ stood." A vague, contentless *fiducia* which can be readily enlisted for Fascist struggle and duty is thus sharply contrasted with Christian faith as an eschatological belief, spelled out in the final article of the BC on the "end of all things."

Thus far our survey of the BC's teaching on Scripture reveals the following: a contention for the whole of the Bible, no dualistic antagonism of Law and Gospel but Christ as personally uniting God's judgment on sin and God's justification of the sinner, faith as dogmatic belief in the new creation promised in Christ as well as personal trust, revelation as controversy and theology as its contemporary interpretation for the sake of public confession. Thus there can be little wonder about the Reformation-Lutheran claim of the BC, with its copious citations from Luther and the confessional writings, except, as previously noted, from a perspective which thinks of the antagonistic dualism of law and gospel as an essential mark of Lutheran theology. Surely the most striking feature of the BC is its retrieval of Luther's doctrine of the *verbum externum* with the corresponding critique of enthusiasm. While the BC is the product of a collaborative effort which can hardly be expected to evince the internal consistency of a single author, it nevertheless striking how the doctrine of the *verbum externum* echoes through the entire BC as the knife's edge cutting through the fog of German Christian "enthusiasm."

On Scripture: "God's Word for me is always a foreign one." On Reformation: Luther "fought against blind overestimation of human reason and rejected as a temptation of the devil the human delusion that one could come to God through one's own spirit, without the divine Word." On the Trinity: "We reject any attempt to dismember the revelation of the Trinitarian God, to claim to understand the creation or reconciliation or redemption as a concept on its own." On Creation: "Pious natural knowledge is

not capable of comprehending God as Creator and the world as creation [...] We reject the false doctrine that in a particular 'hour of history' God is speaking to us directly and is revealed in direct action in the created world, for it is enthusiasm to think one understands the will of God without the express words of Holy Scripture, to which God is bound." On the Orders: "These orders of preservation are therefore of no value in themselves, but only in relation to the end to which God will bring humankind, to the new creation in Christ [...] They are to be distinguished from the law of God. In the law, God speaks through revelation to each human being personally. It represents God's claim to be Lord [...]" On Christ: "The cross of Jesus Christ is not at all a symbol for anything; it is rather the unique revelatory act of God, in which the fulfillment of the law, the judgment of death on all flesh, and the reconciliation of the world with God are carried through for all people." On the Holy Spirit: "the Spirit is given to humankind only through the external Word and the sacraments of the church [...] We reject the false doctrine that the Holy Spirit can be recognized without Christ in creation and its orders [...] The rebellion against this teaching about the Holy Spirit is an ethno-nationalist [*völkisch*] rebellion against the church of Jesus Christ." On the Church: "Thus the church is constituted not by human beings, not even by the faith or the moral qualities of persons, but only by Jesus Christ the Lord: *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*." On the Ministry: "The preaching ministry is service to the Word of reconciliation and is therefore the opposite of any magical powers of leadership." On the Nations: "The message of the gospel is equally accessible, or equally inaccessible, to all peoples. For it is only God's Holy Spirit who can bring about faith [...] The boundaries of the Volk and church are never the same." On the State: "Thus all worldly government, whether good or bad, stands not within the realm of salvation but rather within the realm of death." The BC Confession even discovers a "form of Judaistic enthusiasm" that would assert that "the faith of a Jewish Christian" is a "matter of race or blood!"

The Reformation's *verbum externum* was not simply a matter of the Bible's formal authority over against private interpretation or of learned hermeneutics over against amateurish reader-response speculation. For Luther, the Word from God tells a narrative and hence constitutes a recognizable event; it comes as news from outside the self to unite with the self and as such transform the existing self. The word which does this is not any word in the Bible, but "the pure gospel, the noble and precious treasure

of our salvation. This gift evokes faith and a good conscience in the inner man." Since the gospel's news of Christ's coming in mercy for sinners is not innate, "outwardly [God] deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and the material signs" of Baptism and Supper. "Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts [...] The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward [...] Observe carefully [...] this order, for everything depends on it."²⁹ The sequence is essential; it reflects the narrative structure of this new birth by which it is identified, recognized, and distinguished from imposters. If we "tear down the bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit might come," we end up teaching "not how the Spirit comes to you but how you come to the Spirit." In that case, we give heed to some other spirit than the Spirit of Jesus and His Father. Critical theology in the tradition of Luther must therefore test the spirits by the *verbum externum* – just such *disputation* is what the BC undertakes. To undertake such disputation, to test the contemporary spirits, the BC had announced its dialectic of Spirit and Word at the outset: "Only through the Holy Spirit do we hear the word of God from the Bible. But this Spirit itself comes to us only through the word of the Scriptures in their entirety, and therefore can never, except by enthusiasm, be separated from this word."³⁰ This dialectic of Word and Spirit too can be traced back to Luther, since it provides the grounding in Trinitarian theology of the doctrine of the *verbum externum*.³¹

The BC's retrieval of Luther's biblical hermeneutics is something quite distinct from re-asserting a pre-critical, ahistorical way of reading the Bible under the guise of some allegedly "post-critical" exegesis and theology – something of which Bonhoeffer is accused in his experimenting with new forms of "theological exposition" of the Bible.³² The precise differentiation

²⁹ *Luthers Works: The American Edition*, 58 volumes, St. Louis: Concordia & Philadelphia: Fortress 1955–2011; hereafter LW followed by volume and page number, LW 40, 146.

³⁰ Citing CA V, SA III/8.

³¹ See further Paul R. Hinlicky, "The Theological Circle in *Luther's Anti-Docetism in the Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi (1540)*," in: *Creator est creatura: Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation* ed. O. Bayer & Benjamin Gleede. Berlin & NY: Walter De Gruyter 2007, 169–177.

³² E.g., John A. Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World: A Study of Christ in the World*. London: Collins 1967, 84–94. Phillips perceptively expounds Bonhoeffer's

which I propose here is historically verified by consideration of the devastating impact that Adolph Schlatter's criticism had on the August draft of the BC. Germany's best known pietist-biblicist theologian argued for a total revision of the BC, more "positive," more "biblical" and with a "less dogmatic" approach that would be able to speak to "the SA man[...]"³³ i.e., on the basis of the latter's religious needs. The object of Schlatter's critique, as Guy Carter has rightly seen, was precisely the BC's rigorous retrieval of Luther's *verbum externum*: "the Bethel confessors protested that what was being attempted [in German Christian theology] was in fact an attack on the unity of Scripture which for them was none other than Christ. A syncretistic attempt to in any way 'supplement' the Biblical witness constituted for them a Christological heresy."³⁴ In other words, it is not pious phrases or sentiments from the Bible – even about Jesus – which makes theology Biblical or Christological, even if not especially when they connect with the "religious" needs of contemporaries. What is Biblical is the coming of its central figure, Christ, a figure drawn from the whole Scripture and uniting in Himself God's judgment and justification of His enemy by means of Christ's own cross and resurrection. Christ comes from outside the self to unite with the self and so to transform the self with *this* judgment and justification which He *is*. The authority of Scripture as the historically unique witness to Christ is recognized and put it into effect in the act of interpreting Biblical texts *with* this Christological key *to* this transformative end. That cannot but be controversial, first of all, within the life the churches themselves.

Carter's point is corroborated by contemporary biblical scholarship: classically, the New Testament came into existence as the Christian read-

self-acknowledged *sacrificium intellectus* (92), i.e., the "ultimate suspension of all critical questions" as something both fruitful and dangerous (91), i.e., the "indivisible theological unity of the text" (88).

³³ Carter, 114–7. It is indeed true that Bonhoeffer had been drawn to Adolph Schlatter's "biblicism, a post-critical or positivist attitude towards Biblical exegesis" (113) and drew on it in developing his idea of theological interpretation. Yet it is also true that the impact of Schlatter's "stinging critique" of the BC "would be difficult to overstate" (112). The "post-critical" Biblicist-pietist Schlatter was committed to a form of "natural theology" which worked in tandem with Paul's Althaus' view of "primal revelation" and the "orders of creation" to rob Bethel of its critical force in the ensuing revisions (114).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

ing of the Hebrew Scriptures, taken as its own prophecy (and this quite in parallel to rabbinic Judaism's reading of the Hebrew Scriptures as its own Torah).³⁵ Thus the unity of Old and New Testaments as "book of the church" intended for its "theological exposition"³⁶ corresponds in Bonhoeffer's mind with Scripture, taken as a whole, cohering in Christ and the church in turn as "Christ existing as community."³⁷ If these relationships, which Bonhoeffer developed in his early work, are valid and rightly understood, Biblical texts "cannot adequately be understood by judging them simply through historical criticism but only by interpreting them canonically. Their normative interpretation therefore should not be detached from 'the community of tradition and interpretation' which has sanctioned the canon of texts on the grounds of its 'illumination' and 'authority.' The Protestant principle of Scripture is thus a special form of the *principle of tradition*."³⁸ It follows that whenever "syncretistic" substitutions or additions to this rule (canon) of faith are advanced, they deviate as such from the Christ of Christian faith. It likewise follows that the Trojan Horse of this syncretistic supplementing of Scripture is any systematic principle of "coordination" – *Gleichschaltung*, the Nazi technical term for reordering in-

³⁵ From a contemporary Jewish perspective, see Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, *Writing with Scripture: The Authority and the Uses of the Hebrew Bible in the Torah of Formative Judaism*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg / Fortress 1989); from a contemporary Christian perspective, see Donald H. Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress 1988). See also Martin Kuske significant study, *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ: An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer's Interpretation* trans. S.T. Kimbrough, Jr., Philadelphia: Westminster 1976 which deals with the important question whether Bonhoeffer's Christian reading of the Hebrew Scriptures does "justice to the Old Testament." Kuske rightly argues that the objection is question-begging, since "the" Old Testament exists as a unified collection of diverse writings only by virtue of the community of faith which unified and canonized it as its rule. In this light, what could it mean to understand "it" as such and on its own terms, when "it" exists only in correlation with synagogue or, controversially, with church?

³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 3 trans. D.S. Bax, Minneapolis: Fortress 1997, 22.

³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 1 trans. R. Kraus & N. Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress 1998.

³⁸ Sparr, 169.

stitutions to conform to its worldview – with the perceived needs of contemporaries.³⁹ Thus we concoct some other Christ than the figure rendered by the Scriptures by addition or deletion, an "Aryan Jesus," as in the case under consideration.⁴⁰ The correlation of Christ, Church and Scripture in turn are purely analytical; that correlation is a matter of early doctrinal definition that goes back to primitive Christianity's actual, historical formation when the early Catholic church constituted itself by the recognition of its Scriptural canon in a life and death battle with Gnosticism.⁴¹

That we need such a canon or rule of faith, however, to keep us from deviating from the Christ of Christian faith, involves synthetic judgments involving contemporary confessors in their own act of appropriating faith. So "the reference to 'the' ecclesiastical community of interpretation is therefore not sufficient – in view of the dispute between different communities of interpretation [...]"⁴² within the church. Such judgments are at the heart of the controversy in which the BC is embroiled with German Christianity. The BC has to go beyond mere declaration or recalling classical definitions. It has to argue, to dispute and in the act of faith to come to a contemporary judgment. Why should we adhere to the historical, biblical Christ today? Why should we theologically correlate the Spirit with the external Word from canonical Scripture now? The inclusion in the BC of statements on the meaning of Reformation and on the doctrine of the Trinity were made in order to lay the foundation for such synthetic judgments as are required here and now, as we shall see in conclusion. Yet to appreciate this today, and to continue the project of the BC, we need next to clear away some of the fog of confusion that surrounds our topic from the convoluted legacy of the Barmen Declaration.

³⁹ Paul R. Hinlicky, "A Lutheran Contribution to the Theology of Judaism," in: *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Winter-Spring 1994: 31/1-2) 123-152; "The Scripture's Emergence as the Church's Canon," Chapter Three in: *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress 2010, 69-108.

⁴⁰ Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2008.

⁴¹ See note 37 above.

⁴² Sparr, 170.

Barmen and its Discontents

Precisely in its apodictic repudiations of the German Christian heresies, Barmen leaves begging theological questions that trouble us today. This is a problem not least of all because it causes Barmen's contemporary force to be contextualized away (e.g., as one forever hears from liberal Protestants and their Lutheran allies in the USA: "We are not Nazis – we don't need Barthianism as an antidote!"). Contemporary critics of Barmen are willing to use weighty pejoratives like "authoritarian Christology" to describe Barmen.⁴³ Of course, the sore spots indicated by such pejoratives have existed from the beginning. The "most Lutheran" theologian of all, Werner Elert, accused the Barmen Declaration's affirmation of Jesus Christ as the *one* Word of God of eclipsing the antithetical, twofold form of the Word of God as law which accuses and gospel which consoles.⁴⁴ Despite Elert's (and Althaus's) "pig-headed confessionism" (as Barth later ventilated)⁴⁵ which blinded him (them) to the dangers of that fateful time, the troubling question has persisted whether Barmen in its declamatory brevity all too simply opposed the Christ-authoritarianism of a sectarian religious community to the German Christian endorsement of the *Führerprinzip* for the sake of the religiously integrated *völkisch* community, as if to say: "Choose your dicta-

⁴³ Michael Welker, "Rethinking Christocentric Theology," in: *Transformations in Luther's Theology: Historical and Contemporary Reflections* ed. C. Helmer & B. K. Holm, Arbeiten zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte, Band 32, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2011, 183. Welker confuses a question in the order of knowledge with a question in the order of being. It does not follow from the epistemic exclusiveness of the *verbum externum* that either Christ or the Spirit are locally confined to the Word and sacraments of the church. I can't imagine such a claim being made about Karl Barth's theology! Nor can it correctly be made of Luther's theology. On this see Theodor Dieter's patient and incisive probing of the issues in Chapter Three of his *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles: Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie*. Berlin & NY: Walter de Gruyter 2001).

⁴⁴ Matthew Becker, "Werner Elert in Retrospect," in: *Lutheran Quarterly* Vol. XX, No. 3, Autumn, 2006, 267. As we have seen, however, Bonhoeffer-Sasse coordinate prophetic critic and apostolic reconciliation in the BC without either liberal-Harnackian or conservative-Elertian dualism.

⁴⁵ After studying Elert's *Dogmatics* in the winter semester of 1957f., as cited in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. J. Bowden. Philadelphia: Fortress 1976, 429.

tor! Choose your tribe!" Here there is nothing but a choice – what historian Robert P. Ericksen in his analysis of "theologians under Hitler" called a "jump."⁴⁶ Given the apocalyptic alternative, Hitler or Jesus, that way of posing the question certainly brought clarity – provided that we are looking at the situation apocalyptically, which is exactly what Barmen's opponents were *not* doing (and which we do by virtue of *hindsight*).

To state the obvious: Barmen as a *declaration* did not carry persuasive power for its prophesy or for that matter even attempt to persuade. It makes no argument, which we might reasonably expect of theology as a discipline; it but confronted auditors with a choice. Barmen's choice of genre contrasts stylistically with the BC which argues its case in the genre of disputation (the very cause of the verbosity, scholasticism and extended citation which dismayed critics like Schlatter). Barmen's failure to persuade with its evidently desperate resorting to pure kerygma is a facet of this wider, tragic history, evident among Barmen's discontents to this day. Barmen in fact did not persuade many to adopt the radical choice between Hitler and Jesus that its prophesy implied. This radical choice was not even finally adopted in the Confessing Church, as the frustrations expressed by Barth and Bonhoeffer during the 1930s amply testify: when war broke out in 1939, for example, even Martin Niemöller volunteered from his cell in the concentration camp to rejoin the navy and command a U-boat!

On the other hand, there is considerable irony in pinning a charge of authoritarianism on Barth, who from his 1927 study of Anselm, *Fides quaerens intellectum*, moved decisively away from the most insidious form of authoritarianism in theology, the existentialist decisionism which led theologians like Hirsch and Gogarten headlong into their Nazi *Schwärmerei*. Few theologians have achieved the mature Barth's almost Thomistic quality of charitable interpretation of opponents and fair-minded (but always *pointed*) critique. According to Hockenos, Barth himself, in a letter to Eberhard Bethge years later, expressed a self-critical regret that he had not made the "Jewish problem," as did Bonhoeffer, "the first and decisive question" at the

⁴⁶ Both Tillich and Hirsch "read history, both saw God acting in history, and both believed in the Christian duty of political commitment. Then Tillich jumped left, believing he had interpreted God correctly, and Hirsch jumped right." In: Robert B. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press 1985, 183f.

time of Barmen.⁴⁷ Despite real objections to the “revelational positivism” of his theological program,⁴⁸ there is and has been considerable Lutheran dishonesty in the post-war antipathy to Barth.⁴⁹

Perhaps theological efforts were already too late after 1933.⁵⁰ Perhaps what we should clearly see in hindsight is that only evil choices remained after Hitler took power. A number of historians have concluded as much.⁵¹ Yet theology must do better than this. I can only indicate here for future work the difficulty which Bonhoeffer put his finger on years later when he first wrote from the prison cell about Barth’s “positivism of revelation.” We might recall here as well his nuanced defense of Bultmann for raising

⁴⁷ Hockenos, 173.

⁴⁸ Objections which I locate on the sublime level of Barth’s version of the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of an idealist personalism rather than Bonhoeffer’s *analogia relationis*, i.e. the social model of the Trinity as the primal Beloved Community. See Hinlicky, Paul R. *Paths Not Taken: Theology from Luther through Leibniz*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2009, 127–138.

⁴⁹ When theologians like Hirsch are lumped together with the likes of Sasse as “conservative” Lutherans, one cannot but be imposing a contemporary (American!) schematization in which the “neo-Orthodox” Barth appears as a “progressive!” Even so, Hockenos rightly lifts up the post-war Barth’s bitter campaign against the entrenched and defensive Lutheran church establishment in Germany – “conservative” in this sense, indeed. For a defense of what Hockenos calls the “conservative Lutheran” wing of the Confessing Church, see Lowell C. Green, *Lutherans against Hitler: The Untold Story*. St Louis: Concordia 2007. Greene rightly says that “the suppression of the Bethel Confession is one of the greatest tragedies of the DEK in the Third Reich” (163) but wrongly parses this failure as a consequence of the Lutheran drafters Sasse and Bonhoeffer being subjected to the Reformed critics Schlatter and Barth (164); he goes so far as to state that the position “of Sasse and Bonhoeffer did not differ greatly from that of Althaus and Elert” on law and gospel (170). That astounding judgment is an expression of confessionalistic partisanship of the most undiscerning kind.

⁵⁰ On this see the well-nuanced study of Arne Rasmusson, “‘Deprive Them of Their Pathos’: Karl Barth and the Nazi Revolution Revisited,” in: *Modern Theology* 23/3, July 2007, 369–391.

⁵¹ Ericksen writes: “We can best avoid the Nazi error by heavily stressing the values of the liberal, democratic tradition, humanitarianism and justice, and by conscientiously probing history with a view towards its significance for contemporary decision making.” Ericksen acknowledges that this counsel is itself “an existential judgment based on a leap of faith [...] [which] carries with it the possibility of error” (191). But theology which tests the spirit by the *verbum externum* should be able to do better than existentialist leaping in the dark.

the problem of mythology in the New Testament, if not for Bultmann’s solution to that problem. I take this critique of revelational positivism to apply, not to the principle of *verbum externum* (so critical, as we have seen, for Bonhoeffer’s BC), but to Barth’s tendency, in his (justified!) fear of pious possession of God (*Gott mit uns* on the belt buckle of the *Wehrmacht* soldier), to define revelation purely as event, never as substance. An event can never be epistemically captured but only traced and followed; it either grasps and carries us along with it or we miss it entirely. But a substance can be grasped and even misused – “pushed out of the world and onto a cross,” as Bonhoeffer famously wrote from his prison cell. There is a classic Lutheran – Calvinist difference (*genus apotelesmaticum* as opposed to the *extracalvinisticum*: “the divine nature in Christ also is not idle but is present in the personal union with the suffering nature, willing that it should suffer, permitting it to die [...]”⁵²) between Bonhoeffer and Barth on this point which bears on the prospects of continuing today the project of Bonhoeffer’s BC. But attention to that exceeds the scope of the present essay.

Continuing the Project of Bonhoeffer’s BC

I will venture then my own appropriation of Bonhoeffer’s unfinished theological legacy in regard to Scripture, confession and theological method. The problem of 19th century theology is not the recognition of the need for mediation, but the loss of the *verbum externum*. The problem of Barth’s “positivism of revelation” is not recognition of the *verbum externum*, but disowning the task of mediation. Christologically, the latter deficit is caused by Barth’s locating the exteriority of the Word of God in Christ’s transcendent deity rather than in His incarnate humanity. In that case, the claim of the Word of God either grasps us or it does not. Humanly speaking, we have nothing but a choice. Only then can faith seek understanding – without first understanding what is believed. But if we take the exteriority of the *Verbum externum* to be the Bible’s human witness to the Crucified Messiah, we have a considerable problem of intelligibility on our hands before we are ever in any position to make a judgment of belief or disbelief.

⁵² Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures of Christ* trans. J.A.O. Preus. St Louis: Concordia, 1971, 222f.

This approach sheds light on the difficulty we have today with Bonhoeffer's apparent rejection of, or at least disinterest in, the historical criticism of the Bible.⁵³ For Bonhoeffer theological exposition of the Bible is precisely its "non-religious" interpretation, since in Bonhoeffer's day historical-criticism of the Bible understood itself in the framework of the "history of religions" school, with its "religious a priori" (Troeltsch) of inwardness and self-transcendence and the corresponding craving for absolutes within history. Reading the Bible this way, howsoever "critically," perpetuates the captivity of Christianity as the mere chaplaincy of the people's putative religious needs. Such relevance of church as "chaplaincy" of natural religious needs was the most powerful argument for German Christianity. Here the Bible becomes a smorgasbord, as Sir Edwyn Hoskins, the British translator of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, contemporaneously parodied it:

In the midst of this rich, varied gallery [= the Gospels], the reader can wander about. He is magnificently free. He can pause and admire, where he will. He can select an incident, visualize it, meditate upon it, and then preach about it, allegorize it, interpret it, symbolize it, apply it to his own circumstances, use it to pillory his enemies or to encourage himself and his friends; he can, in fact, construe it according to his own will and satisfaction, and finally, he can interpret it so as to escape from the teaching of St Paul, say, in the Epistle to the Romans, or so as to thrust the Fourth Gospel well onto the periphery of the Christian Religion. And in doing all this he can pride himself that he is acting in obedience to the highest authority, that of the authentic teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, and that he is a true disciple of the 'Jesus of History' because he has heard Him speak and seen Him act.⁵⁴

This captivity of the Bible to the supposed religious needs of even the Bible's putatively most radical critics was Bonhoeffer's discovery in the research leading up to the BC. Not incidentally, Bonhoeffer's discovery of the hidden captivity of the history of religions methodology to contemporary religious

⁵³ Phillips, 84-94.

⁵⁴ Sir Edwyn Clement Hoskins, *The Fourth Gospel*. ed. Francis Noel Davey. London, 1947, 65.

needs under the mask of putatively "radical" and "scientific" criticism of the Bible in quest of the Jesus of History is something that Susannah Heschel's pioneering research on Walter Grundmann amply corroborates.⁵⁵

The problem for Bonhoeffer is manifestly not the humanity of the Bible as disclosed by historical-critical scholarship; as we have seen, the Bible's human status as witness corresponds to the Spirit who alone makes the Bible speak Christ to the present (an echo of Confessio Augustana V: *ubi et quando Deo visum est*). Theology has no coercive power. It is not in control of reception in faith; it has only the power of the Word, the power to same-say (Greek: *homologizein*) what it hears the Spirit speaking in the church through the Bible to the world. As an act of faith, theology must leave effects to the Spirit, expecting the controversy that befits its message of Christ crucified. Such articulation cannot be a mindless repetition of past truths, but only the timely application of the same Biblical message in human words to the present situation. What is decisive, then, is Bonhoeffer's notion that theological interpretation is achieved when "the present age must justify itself before the biblical message," as he would later put it in Finkenwald.⁵⁶ The BC, as originally conceived, was this hermeneutical act of *mediation*. Contemporary understanding of the biblical and confessional resources is genuinely achieved by the concrete act of bearing witness. This witness is not made as an *obiter dicta*, but rather as a timely theological argument against the introduction of the Aryan Paragraph into the ministry of the church, attesting instead to the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ.

Why then did *this* argumentative strategy of Bonhoeffer's BC come to naught? That is the real question. Why did *this* attempt to make the present age justify itself before the biblical message fall on deaf ears, not of the SA man (who never heard what the BC had to say) but rather and especially among the theologians who read Bonhoeffer's BC incomprehendingly?

In Germany in the 1930s such a conception of the theological task was not self-evident, just as little as it is today, least of all such a relation to the Bible as source and norm of theology whose task is public confession of the controversial Christ. That is why Bonhoeffer felt that his effort in

⁵⁵ Susannah Heschel's Chapter Six, "The Postwar Years," in: *The Aryan Jesus*, 242-278, which features the rehabilitation of Walter Grundmann's scholarly reputation and project, underscores how quickly business returned to usual. Bonhoeffer's critique has yet to be fully heard and understood.

⁵⁶ *No Rusty Swords*, 308.

the BC was met with near total incomprehension. Theology as the critical dogmatics of the tradition of the Gospel of the Christ crucified as known from Holy Scriptures is exactly what the German Christians rejected;⁵⁷ yet neither in the final analysis was Bonhoeffer's understanding of the confessing theology of the Reformation's *verbum externum* shared by many in the Confessing Church or of those who remained neutral in the Church Struggle. Then as also today theology itself, as an academic and as a church discipline, is most profoundly controverted. That is what Bonhoeffer is discovering in his contemporaneous alienation from the university, reinforced after reading the criticisms of the August draft of the BC. As Bonhoeffer more and more clearly sees, the power to "convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8) by means of the theological task of interpretation of the Bible is subverted paradoxically by a well-intentioned but false bid for *Lebensbezug*: "Can Christianity make itself real to us, just as we are?"⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer's drastic answer to this question is a *Nein!* as clear and loud as Barth's to Brunner, even though the accents and the occasions differ. In some distinction from Barth, Bonhoeffer's would-be "No" is not mere prophecy, demanding nothing but a choice. It is a No! that is to be achieved by a theological mediation which interprets and persuades, a disputational and indeed critically dogmatic hermeneutic which Bonhoeffer ultimately came to describe as *that* "non-religious interpretation of the biblical concepts" which *is* Christ crucified, *the stumbling block*. But that proved to be a far larger project than the BC could have imagined or accomplished.

Conclusion

As I have hinted throughout, the addition by Bonhoeffer in the August draft of the second article on the Trinity is salient in conclusion for it tells who Jesus Christ is for God and who God is for Jesus Christ. Today critics of Barmen's "Christomonism" regularly plead for a more "Trinitarian" theology, as if *this* meant one could *separate* the Spirit from the incarnate Word as witnessed in the Biblical texts. This is not any serious kind of

⁵⁷ Bergen, 44–60.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Trinitarianism for which *opera Dei ad extra sunt indivisa*. Such separation would be mere repetition of German Christian "enthusiasm," which is in fact Trinitarian *error*. To the contrary, the BC's rigorous Trinitarianism is there to provide the grounding in the very doctrine of God for the BC's retrieval of the *verbum externum* as mediated by the dialectic of Word and Spirit: "So the Trinitarian God is recognized as Father through the Son, as Son through the Father, as Father and Son through the Holy Spirit, as Holy Spirit through the Father and Son." BC's article on the Holy Spirit emphatically endorses the Western *filioque* to the same effect: knowledge of God entails that the *Holy Spirit* at work beyond the walls of the church in the world be *recognizable* as the Spirit of *Jesus* and *His* Father in distinction from all manner of *unholy* spirits. Contemporary critics of "Barthianism" likewise lament Barmen's alleged loss of the "Jesus of history," forgetting that the actual alternative to Jesus Christ in Barmen's sense was Walter Grundmann's *Jesus the Galilean* (i.e., the *Aryan*)!⁵⁹ For the BC, by contrast, the Person of Christ is not reduced to the Jesus of history (who *is* of course affirmed precisely as *the Jew*, the "Son of David," no "flare of Nordic light" in the midst of a world tormented by signs of decay"). As the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ is revealed through the unity of the Scriptures or not all, by His own Spirit, then, or not at all. What the BC has to say about Scripture forms an integral whole with its classical Trinitarianism. Likewise, its answer to the question, What is Reformation?, is not a repristinating move, but a retrieval of "confessional" authority in the form of the acute claim for the externality of the Gospel's Word of God concerning the Christ crucified appropriated rightly in the concrete contemporary act of confession.

The project of the BC was, of course, time-bound. It was addressed to the specific crisis of the introduction of the Aryan Paragraph into the Evangelical Church. Not only was its critical force for testing the spirits dissipated in a vain attempt to achieve a nominally Lutheran consensus and relevance, but also its time quickly passed. Its light never shined in the gathering darkness. Contemporary retrieval of its project would thus make it clear today how little has changed in church and theology's "business as usual."

⁵⁹ For the fuller argument here, see *Beloved Community*, 31–46.