

Christ, Reality, Encounter, and the Lived Community: The Christological Shape of Bonhoeffer's Ethics as an Approach to Disability

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Abstract

When it comes to disabilities, two of the major challenges in both society and the church are the medical and charity models of approaching disability. These models, which approach those with disabilities as the site of biological curing and as objects of pity, lead to dehumanizing ideas and inhumane treatment. This essay retrieves the Christological anthropology and epistemology of 20th century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer to build an approach modeled on “mutual encounter,” arguing that this approach counters idealistic understandings of the human person and instead points human relationships toward the preservation of particularities in both body and mind.

Keywords: *Disability, theology, Bonhoeffer, Christology, Ethics, Mutuality, Theological Anthropology, Christological Anthropology, intellectual disability, ecclesiology.*

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Introduction

This essay is an exploration of the Christian doctrine of Christology and its effect upon the Christian life as particularly formulated by twentieth century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Utilizing Bonhoeffer's understanding of Jesus Christ as the ontological ground of all reality, I hope to show how the use of Christology in this way provides vital resources for approaching the topic of disability; specifically, in understanding the role of the responsible community in living *with* those with disabilities. I begin this approach by exploring Bonhoeffer's understanding of all reality as Christ's reality, looking at the ontological consequences of this method. Here, I emphasize Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ's unique embrace of humanity and the world in order to provide the trajectory for lived engagement with disability. Second, I discuss the impact of this reality upon Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology. I show how Bonhoeffer counters idealistic understandings of the human by pointing to the lived reality of Christ. Featured heavily in this section is the dynamic of modern attempts at forcing these ideal types upon the lives of people with disabilities, in which I hope to clarify how Bonhoeffer's Christology allows for the preservation of unique and diverse bodies/lives. For the purpose of this essay, for the most part I limit my scope to Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* (2009a) since it displays much of his explicit Christological foundations for ethics and community life.

After engaging with Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology as informed by Christology, I examine the specific roles of bodied life in his theology. I retrieve Bonhoeffer's understanding of the *penultimate* and *ultimate* to show how the real lived world is preserved in Christ's reality, specifically to counter two possible objections to my argument. Important to this discussion is whether or not Bonhoeffer's Christology allows him to preserve the particularity of the person while moving toward the discussion of the community. Lastly, I conclude with Bonhoeffer's understanding of history and the good in order to posit the necessity of the community as an *encounter* in approaching disability. I hope to show that Bonhoeffer's above categories give us resources to reject charity models of disability and move toward models of *mutual encounter*.

Before analyzing Bonhoeffer's Christological ethics, it is first necessary to set the parameters for this approach to disability. Disability studies in general, and disability theology in particular, reflect upon the lived reality of those with disabilities. Disability theology, however, is not monolithic.

Indeed, some disability theology begins with the experience of disability while other forms may allow disability to shape or challenge constructive theological reflection (Swinton, 2010). Broadly speaking,

[d]isability theology begins with the recognition that people with disabilities have been at best a minority voice in the development of Christian theology and practice and at worst have been completely silenced within the conversation. In listening to such voices and reflecting on the life experiences of people with disabilities, it hopes to re-think and recalibrate aspects of theology and practice that serve to exclude or to misrepresent the human experience of disability (Swinton, 2010, pp. 274-275).

The charity model of disability is the model most often practiced, which views disability as a site of pity. As Bethany McKinney Fox helpfully summarizes, this model “frames the experience of disability, and by extension people with disabilities, as tragic and pitiable” (2019, p. 99). This understanding of disability often manifests in top-down relationships in which those with disabilities lack access to God without the help of those without disabilities. Additionally, this perspective impacts the understanding of healing narratives in Scripture and the portrayal of those with disabilities.

It is also important to note my use of terminology. The issue of terminology and what it represents is contentious in disability studies/theology. For the purposes of this essay, I use the phrase “people with disabilities” in order to emphasize person-first language and the term “disability” to broadly cover a range of diagnoses (though I have in mind primarily intellectual disability). McKinney Fox’s extensive introduction on the dynamics of terminology is helpful here (p. 4). This paper is concerned with the necessity of the community’s role in the lives of those with disabilities, seeking to place the Christological origins of the ecclesiological concept under a proverbial magnifying glass. Having explored the parameters of this study, I now move into the explicit engagement with Bonhoeffer’s Christological ethics.

Christ, Reality, and Good – The Ontological and Noetic Ground

Bonhoeffer’s seminal work *Ethics* introduces the question of the constitution of good life or action, found in the manuscript “*Christ, Reality, and Good.*” The question of the good is concerned chiefly with decisions made concerning ultimate reality, which according to Bonhoeffer is necessarily a matter of

faith (p. 47). The problem of ethics is a problem of reality embedded within the larger scope of ultimacy, the definite starting point being God as “Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer” (p. 48). To combat ethics as abstraction and idealization (“laws and norms”), Bonhoeffer caveats this God-reality by pointing not to a modification of the world but to God’s *self-witness* – namely the *person* of Jesus Christ. The move here toward the idea of reality and its relationship to the self-witness of God in Jesus Christ marks a shift from abstraction to the concrete that characterizes much of Bonhoeffer’s work and is the foundation for his understanding of ethics (Pangritz, 1999). In striking similarity to Karl Barth’s explanation of the orientation of the doctrine of election, Bonhoeffer establishes both that the reality of God is revealed within Jesus Christ alone and that ethics must operate within this reality.

Barth’s doctrine of election posits that in Jesus Christ, God has placed Himself in relationship with humanity, stating that it is “a relationship outside of which God no longer wills to be and no longer is God... Jesus Christ is indeed God in His movement towards man.” This is the fundamental shape of Barth’s moral theology, that God has freely decided to be God for humanity (Barth, 2010, p. 7)

The role that the *Christ-reality* plays in Bonhoeffer’s moral theology is central. What occurs in this understanding of ultimate reality being God in Jesus Christ is a holding together of the reality of God and the reality of this world. To live in the reality of the world is to live in Christ’s reality, there is no other option. The Christological ground of social ethics for Bonhoeffer is “*Christ becoming real [Wirklichwerden] among God’s creatures*” (2009a, p. 49). Consequentially, the reality of the world is affirmed and embraced in Jesus Christ. Due to this embrace, the Christian life “is never separated from the world, nor is the world separated from Christ” (Nissen, 2011, 325). Christian ethics, the “good,” is an invitation to participate in Christ by participating in the reality of the lived and bodied world, the guiding question being how the reality of Christ becomes concrete today. Once again, it is worth noting that this participatory call is echoed somewhat in Barth’s moral theology. For both Bonhoeffer and Barth, the reality of Jesus Christ’s movement toward humanity necessitates this “partnership” and participation. God’s existence in Christ is the determination of human action. As Barth claims, “it therefore determines his action to correspondence, conformity, and uniformity with God’s action” (2010, 575).

This embrace of both realities is significant for Bonhoeffer’s understanding of humanity as well. The concept of the whole is present in the following statement:

Human beings are indivisible wholes, not only as individuals in both their person and work, but also as members of the human and created community to which they belong. It is this indivisible whole, that is, this reality grounded and recognized in God, that the question of the good has in view. “Creation” is the name of this indivisible whole according to its origin. According to its goal it is called the kingdom of God. Both are equally far from us and yet near to us, because God’s creation and God’s kingdom are present to us only in God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ (Bonhoeffer, 2009a, 53).

The whole human being, the person and work (embodied life), is grounded in the ontological reality of Jesus Christ. The entering into reality by Jesus Christ overcomes idealistic notions both of the good and of the body/life. Bonhoeffer’s argument not only runs contra Hegelian and Kantian notions of ethics, but also the anthropologies underlying such formulations. Idealistic and empiricist notions of ethics and anthropology turn toward the subjective individual who “stands prior to and apart from” their surroundings (which become “objects”). Michael Mawson notes that, for Bonhoeffer, the use of reason as the mediator between the individual and the other closes the subject off from acknowledgement of God as free and prevents “genuine sociality among human beings” (2018, pp. 2-3). Mawson’s focus is on Bonhoeffer’s critique of idealism in *Sanctorum Communio*. This critique is present in the background in this section of *Ethics*. Against this idealism, which prevents the subject from engaging genuinely with the world, Bonhoeffer’s belief that Christ unites the reality of the world and of God situates the individual as created by God and for others. The real occupied space of Christ in the world embraces the earthy embodied reality of humanity.

The Christ-reality, as a result of the Incarnation’s occupation of real space, is manifested concretely in the life of the church (Nissen, 2011, 327). The community of the church is the place of lived proclamation of this reconciliation of both realities and, as evidenced above, the reconciliation of these realities in Christ is fundamentally related to the embodied life of human others. Bonhoeffer claims:

that in the body of Christ all humanity is accepted, included, and borne, and that the church-community of believers is to make this known to the world by *word* and *life*. This means not being separated from the world, but calling the world into the community of the

body of Christ to which the world in truth already belongs (2009a, p. 67).

In the context of disability, the foundation of all reality being reconciled in Christ as the Christ-reality prevents the Christian life from disengagement with the world as it is. In particular, those with disabilities and those without them both move in this Christ-reality and are invited to participate in the goodness of Christ via holistic response. It is from this foundation that the possibility of Christ's manifestation in the life of our relation to the other is opened, that is, the possibility of *encounter* begins with this understanding of reality. Before exploring this however, I turn to an extended examination of the impact of the Christ-reality on Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology.

Ecce Homo: The Specific Shape of Humanity

Having surveyed Bonhoeffer's foundation of the Christ-reality as the source for Christian ethics, I now turn to look in detail at the shape of Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology. I hope to explain how his theological anthropology, informed by Christology, challenges charity models of disability by revealing the tendency toward forcing idealistic notions of the body and health upon those with disabilities. Instead, Bonhoeffer's anthropology allows for those with disabilities to be *figures* of Christ.

In "*Ethics as Formation*," Bonhoeffer expounds upon the meaning and shape of the human person as it relates to the moral formation of human action. Helpful for understanding the Christological shape of Bonhoeffer's anthropology may be the criteria set by Marc Cortez. Cortez offers two criteria for both a "minimal" Christological anthropology and a "comprehensively" Christological anthropology. Bonhoeffer's anthropology seems to fit the category of comprehensive due to the fact that his Christology governs claims upon "all anthropological data." (Cortez, 2017, p. 21). Critical to Bonhoeffer's understanding of the human is the *definite* shape that the Incarnation takes, not that of an ideal human but "human beings as they are" (2009a, p. 84). The Incarnation exposes the human proclivity to place ourselves as the judge of what is truly human, a concern Bonhoeffer makes explicit when he states:

God has no patience with our dividing the world and humanity according to our standards and imposing ourselves as judges over them.

God leads us ad absurdum by becoming a real human being...God stands beside the real human being and the real world against all their accusers. So God becomes accused along with human beings and the world, and thus the judges become the accused (p. 84).

As a result of the Incarnation, the contempt for real human life is judged. Humanity is no longer able to preside over humanity as judge. Bonhoeffer notes that contempt for real humanity is not only found in the temptation to use violence to force idealized humanity upon others (the example of the “tyrant”) but also in an idolization of health, reason, goodness, and success. It is this “love” for humanity that places these criteria over the real human, which “God has loved and taken on...” (p. 87). For Bonhoeffer, the reality of Christ points to the anthropological fact that humanity exists before God and with others (*Coram Deo*). To idolize humanity, and to force idealizations upon humanity, is to deny that God has become truly human.

Once again, Bonhoeffer’s theological commitments establish a counter to anthropological idealism. As explored above, the position of the subject as mediator of reality through the use of reason prevents openness to God and to others. Mawson notes that Bonhoeffer’s conception of humanity existing before God allows humanity to recognize “that it is not, in fact, an atomistic and self-sufficient subject, but one who already stands in concrete, personal relationships” (2018, p. 5). Human recognition is mediated by the reality of Christ as truly human, seen especially on the cross. It is on the cross, in the suffering of Christ, that the idolization of success and health find their death. This is similar to the possibility of offense in Christ found in Kierkegaard’s work. Christ cannot be judged by success and results because His life runs counter to them in His concrete shape as the “abased” and “humiliated” (Kierkegaard, 1991, p. 23 and Bonhoeffer, 2009a, pp. 88-90). The idolization of success, which “justifies injustice done,” is countered with Christ’s sanctifying of humility (Bonhoeffer, 2009a, 88). Due to Christ’s nature as both fully human and fully divine (one person, two natures), the humble existence of humanity participates in the life of God. Humanity is freed to be human, and as such all efforts to transcend the human or move beyond it are “untrue.” By taking on true humanity, God retains the diversity of its shape, as Bonhoeffer explains:

The manifold riches of God’s creation are not violated here by a false uniformity, by forcing people to submit to an ideal, a type, or a particular image of the human. The real human being is allowed to

be in freedom the creature of the Creator. To be conformed with the one who became human means that we may be the human beings that we really are (2009a, 94).

Rather than the autonomous subject mediating through reason, the individual is addressed by God as a particular human being. Additionally, in the concrete reality of Christ, “God addresses and constitutes the human being as person through a concrete human other” (Mawson, 2018, p. 6). Christ acts as the mediator of reality and experience, and this mediation occurs in the setting of the concrete community. In his lectures delivered while in Berlin in 1933, Bonhoeffer points to the encounter with Christ found within the community by arguing that Christ is not “being-in-himself” but rather Christ is known in the subjective appropriation by the individual within the community. He states that “Christ is not in-himself and also in the church-community, but the Christ who is the only Christ is the one present in the church-community *pro-me*.” (Bonhoeffer, 2013, p. 314). Indeed, the concrete reality of Christ becoming a *real* human necessitates that humanity be transfigured into the figure [*Gestalt*] of Christ which is the image of the *real* human. Over and against the idealization of some *beyond-humanness* [or *Übermenschentum*] placed upon one another, Bonhoeffer’s Christological anthropology precludes hierarchical relationships with other human beings that seek to form them to an ideal human standard due to the reality of Christ’s embrace of the *real* human. Bonhoeffer is arguing here against the desire to grow beyond what is human, desire present in the context of Nazism. Additionally, this formation toward the real human as affirmed by Jesus Christ takes place exclusively in the context of the other. It is within the community of the church, which is embedded within the reality of the world, where the encounter with Christ occurs. “What takes place in the church happens vicariously and representatively as a model for all human beings...The church is nothing but that piece of humanity where Christ really has taken form” (Bonhoeffer, 2009a, p. 97). Christ, and the good, take form in the encounter with Him in the community that humanity is placed within. As Bernd Wannewetsch summarizes, “[o]nly *Christus praesens* is *totus Christus*... the whole Christ is always the present Christ” (2010, p. 81). The result is the encounter that places ethical responsibility upon the individual toward the other within the community as a manifestation of Christ. It is this result that I will return to later.

Bonhoeffer’s Christological anthropology, as briefly surveyed above, acts as a helpful resource in understanding modern approaches to disability

within the church. The reality of Christ taking on the *real* human form unveils the violent idealistic tendencies of Western medical practice, but it also reveals more nuclear manifestations of idealism within the church (Brock, 2019). Medical models of disability, which approach individuals with disabilities as primarily biological subjects, attempt to “cure” the body/mind of that which does not correspond to cultural ideals of wholeness and health. As Sharon V. Betcher explicates, medical models reflect the “Western vision of the perfect, the whole and wholesome body” (2007, p. 49). Noting how these medical approaches attempt to conform those with disabilities to the image of “autonomous self-made, self-mastering” individuals, Betcher draws a parallel between medical models of disability and common ecclesial charity approaches by pointing to their shared “theological” foundation (p. 49). In particular, “secularized forms of the miracle story” result in violence upon those with disabilities, justifying a long list of treatments and structural injustices including but not limited to “late capitalist and neocolonial conditions.” Betcher’s concern with how economics of late capitalism and the violent actions of neocolonialism parallels the way in which Bonhoeffer’s warnings against idealism’s clash with the real human often manifests itself in systemic violence. In Bonhoeffer’s case, this was explicit in the Nazi regime.

Idealist and medical understandings of the human body and mind oft undergird modern church treatment of those with disabilities, viewing individuals as merely static receivers of pity and help. These treatments seem to convey that those who provide the pity and charity are somewhat “higher” on an ambiguous scale of ideal humanity. At the ontological center of humanity in the medical and charity models stands the able-bodied and self-assertive individual, whose “spectral figure establishes ‘ability’ as the orienting frame of reference” (Brock, 2019, p. 141). As Bonhoeffer notes, even if our approach is influenced by “love” it can still be contempt toward the *real* human if it idolizes health and success. All too common is the tendency to impose standards of “health” upon those with disabilities. In contrast, Christ takes on the *real* human in the form of weakness and humility. Thus, our standards of humanity are shifted to recognize the presence of Christ in the person who stands before us. Christ is present with us within the context of the community, where He acts as mediator between persons. As I hope to show, it is this space which opens the possibility for those with disabilities and those without them to be before one another in openness to encounter Christ.

The Value of Embodied Life: Particularity in the Community?

Before moving forward in analyzing Bonhoeffer's concept of responsibility and encounter within the Christian community, I want to first briefly focus on a possible challenge of this approach. One could object to my emphasis on the interdependence of persons in light of Christ in two ways. First, it could be objected that this emphasis erases real differences between those with disabilities and those without them in the community. The second objection comes somewhat as an extension of the first. By emphasizing the idea of Christ's presence in the real human being to point us toward a theology of mutual encounter over and against charity models, it could be objected that I have erased the particularity of the reality of those who are indeed dependent on others for care. I address both of these concerns by retrieving Bonhoeffer's understanding of the relation between the ultimate and penultimate, as well as how Christ's coming into real humanity forms our understanding of bodied life.

Bonhoeffer's categories of the ultimate and penultimate fit under his larger discussion on reality and the issue of participation in the reality of the world. The ultimate is that which is "beyond the daily life," it is the realized teleology of the present reality. The two extremes of relating to the ultimate or the penultimate manifest in either the *disengagement* with the penultimate for the sake of the ultimate or the *placing* of the penultimate *as* the ultimate. The temptation here is a temptation to absolutize something other than Christ. Once again drawing upon the unity of the reality of the world and the reality of God in the Christ-reality, Bonhoeffer argues that the natural life of the world is preserved as the penultimate with an eternal telos by the entrance of Jesus Christ (2009a, p. 155). Interaction with the penultimate is not informed by the natural world on its own, but rather is shaped by the reality that

in the becoming human we recognize God's love toward God's creation, in the crucifixion God's judgement on all flesh, and in the resurrection God's purpose for a new world. Nothing could be more perverse than to tear these three apart, because the whole is contained in each of them...the ultimate has become real in the cross-as judgement on all that is penultimate, but at the same time as grace for the penultimate...(Bonhoeffer, 2009a, pp. 157-158).

As a consequence of this, the penultimate is not eradicated by the ultimate but rather calls the Christian into a life of participation in the particular world. Thus, Bonhoeffer can affirm that this participation is participation “in Christ’s encounter with the world” (2009a, p. 159). The acceptance of the penultimate and its freedom to *be* penultimate is given by the ultimate and *preserved* by it. Thus, Christ’s entrance into the world, as a *real* human being, not only makes the reality of the world oriented toward the ultimate but also preserves the real differences that are found between them. How does this prevent the erasure of the real differences between those with disabilities and those without them in the community? The differences between individuals are indeed embraced and maintained by Christ’s particular entrance into humanity, as I have shown, but these differences (and how we approach them in praxis) must be informed by the ultimate. To emphasize one over the other falls into the temptation of the extremes. It prevents the temptation to view our particulars as ultimate (ex. the absolutizing of the “abled” body over and against the disabled body as more teleologically or even eschatologically “whole”) but also prevents the erasure of our differences (ex. the ignoring of the particular needs of the individual who is physically dependent upon another). The meaning of our particularities, found in relationship to one another, is informed and determined by the ultimate reality of Christ. John Swinton also resources Bonhoeffer’s concepts of ultimate and penultimate in the context of disability, though he focuses on the broader parameters of disability theology (Swinton, 2010, p. 305).

Yet, there still remains the question of the dynamic between charity and dependence. If Christ indeed has come as a *real* human being, a reality that prevents idealistic anthropologies and treatment, then have I emphasized the mutual encounter of Christ in the community at the expense of those who truly are dependent on others? In other words, have I “equalized” the relationship between those with disabilities and those without them to the extent that dependence is seen as a denial of the real human?

In order to address this objection, I draw not only from the above groundwork of the affirmation of the penultimate but also the command that goes forth from this affirmation. As I previously mentioned, the value of the penultimate necessitates that human life in *all* of its forms be preserved. In the idea of the relation between the ultimate and penultimate, the present life is embraced. It is here that Bonhoeffer develops the idea of *responsibility* (to which I return in detail below), which calls humanity toward concrete action. As Bonhoeffer argues, it does *not* require humanity to *create desirable or perfect harmonious conditions* but rather to meet particular concrete

needs. That is, in the context of dependence, those who rely upon physical care already embrace their given human reality and those who are without disabilities embrace mutuality when they embrace the concrete needs of the other rather than force the other into desirable conditions. As a result of Christ, this given life becomes oriented toward Him and the “content” of life becomes the preservation of life as it is *present* before us (Bonhoeffer, 2009a, p. 174). Rather than place the impetus of encounter upon those without disabilities, the preservation of the penultimate makes clear that both parties approach one another in their present humanity. By doing so, they affirm the ultimate reality, that Christ has embraced not the idealist version of the human but the present one before us. It is evident that a theology of mutual encounter does not necessitate the erasure of certain care-giving relationships, but rather rightly orients them toward the affirmation of the human in Jesus Christ and additionally places boundaries upon the proper expression of care. As I previously addressed, the reality of Jesus Christ prevents relationships that require a certain level of dependence from being harnessed to perpetuate idealizations of the human body and mind. This is certainly the case here as well, as Christ’s affirmation of present life within the penultimate informs our understanding of such relationships. Additionally, it points to the reality that our concepts of health within the body, mind, and soul must be oriented toward the preservation of life and its teleological end in Christ over and against cultural idealistic forms. Bonhoeffer thus argues that “the ultimate basis of health and healing” is the very life of the individual and community in preservation. Indeed, “life...is its own doctor” (2009a, p. 176). This gives room for relationships where dependence is necessary to be based upon affirmation of the *real* human as affirmed by Christ rather than relationships of dependence that are reliant upon ideas of pity and tragedy present in charity models. Lastly, dependence does not eliminate the idea that before one another we are faced with mutual encounter of Christ and responsibility. Still, how might we narrate what seems like an inability to participate in this mutuality in the lives of those with severe intellectual disabilities (esp. those whose agency is not readily available or obvious)? It is to this concept I return to below.

First, however, I note that I am aware of the potentially problematic language Bonhoeffer uses to identify the “severely retarded from birth” with “unfortune” and “distortion.” It could additionally be objected that Bonhoeffer himself takes the charity model of disability. I do not reserve much space in this essay for this argument on two grounds: First, my account is a retrieval of Bonhoeffer’s theology but necessarily seeks to move beyond his scope. As

such, I would argue that the larger framework of Bonhoeffer's theology is useful for arguing against the charity model and for a theology of mutual encounter and responsibility. Secondly, Bonhoeffer's own theology as I have surveyed seems to fit an understanding of the social dynamics of disability despite his mentioning of tragedy in this specific instance (2009a, p. 195).

A COMMUNITY OF MUTUAL ENCOUNTER: RESPONSIBILITY AND OPENNESS TO CHRIST

Having briefly addressed potential problems in my account, I turn now toward Bonhoeffer's ethics of responsibility in order to posit an understanding of mutual encounter in approaching disability rather than the charity model. As I explained above, Bonhoeffer's ethics are built upon a robust Christological anthropology that locates humanity as both embraced by God and interrelated to the other. Bonhoeffer's formulation counters idealist anthropologies in both their individual and social forms. Additionally, the reality of Christ's entrance into humanity is manifested to us today in the concrete community of the church (i.e., the Body of Christ) where we are open to encountering Christ in encountering one another. To participate in reality is to enter into responsibility for one another, or as Nissen summarizes "reality is constituted in the moment of accepting the responsibility for another person" (2011, p. 311). In "History and Good," Bonhoeffer raises the concern of the "isolated individual" as the one who constitutes reality and the good, suggesting that all of his theological work up to this point has sought to abandon this notion (2009a, p. 219). As we have seen, this is certainly the case with Bonhoeffer's account of reality as the Christ-reality as well as his Christological anthropology that posits Christ as the true mediator between persons (thus, embracing all of humanity). Indeed, Bonhoeffer's view of Christ's life, suffering, and resurrection indicate that "the Incarnation is an event which transforms the total structures of the world" (Marsh, 1992, p. 443). The affirmation of historical existence places responsibility upon the individual within the community rather than a private existence that is disengaged from the other (Bonhoeffer, 2009a, p. 219). The historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*] of human existence necessitates the social existence of humanity, which brings along with it the necessity of *encounter*. Given the strong relation between human encounter, history, and God's embrace in Christ, how does Bonhoeffer prevent the Hegelian absolute identification of temporal existence with the divine? Lest we unquestioningly attribute

our actions with the movement of God, Charles Marsh summarizes that for Bonhoeffer that unity is established by “reconciliation of God and the world” but this does not necessitate “essential identity” (1992, p. 444).

Christian social ethics are recognized in recognizing the other. The historicity of humanity positions individuals for the ethical claim placed upon them by the existence of the other (Green, 1999, p. 115). This encounter, which places a claim upon the individual, entails responsibility [*Verantwortung*]. Green notes that the German word Bonhoeffer uses for “responsibility” is related to the concept of “answerability” (Ibid.). For Bonhoeffer, as I hinted at above, Christ is present in the community. It is here that Bonhoeffer’s use of *Christus pro me* is evident, calling humanity toward existential appropriation of Christ in the moral situation. Indeed, the manifestation of Christ in the mutual encounter within the community gives humanity the freedom to respond without “the temptation of organizing an ethical topography in such a neat and comprehensive fashion” (Wannenwetsch, 2010, p. 85). In other words, in this encounter humanity is realized to be fully embraced, affirmed, and liberated to be *truly human* (echoing the Chalcedonian Creed). As Brian Brock notes, freedom is not a quality that humanity intrinsically wields but rather it is a given pronouncement by God in Jesus Christ that frees humanity from these “routinized” forms of morality and treatment (2016, p. 446). In sum, the historicity of humanity as affirmed by Jesus Christ frees us from isolated idealism into the freedom of being bound to one another (Bonhoeffer, 2009a, p. 226).

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer clarifies the meaning of this Christologically mediated encounter. Bonhoeffer argues that the human person “grows out of the concrete situation,” being constituted by the relationship between the divine other (God) and the human other (2009b, p. 49). Against the idealist definition of spirit as mediator, which argues for spirit as being-for-itself [*Fürsichsein*], Bonhoeffer posits the notion of the human person as un-isolated and originating “only in the absolute duality of God and humanity” (p. 49). As Michael Mawson clarifies, God addresses the human person through the concrete other in such a way that “places the human person into a situation of ethical decision and obligation” (2018, p. 6). The human person is not collapsed into “a borrowed attribute of God” however, but is instead created and affirmed in its “uniqueness and separateness” (Bonhoeffer, 2009b, p. 55). God is then the mediator between persons as the creator of their particularities, establishing the *I-You-relation*. Human beings, who exist in isolation and solitude due to sin’s severance of

this social relation, are freed to be for one another by the mediating love of Jesus Christ. As Bonhoeffer notes, the relationship “between God and human beings that was cut by the first Adam is tied anew by God, by revealing God’s own love in Jesus Christ” (2009b, p. 145). Christ steps between the social relationships of persons, made difficult by isolating tendencies and idealistic notions of personhood, and opens the door for this relation to be made real in love. That is, to encounter the “other” in Christ is to embrace and love the *real* “other” in all their particularities as a You. As Bonhoeffer explains, the real human neighbor (not the ideal one) is again not collapsed into the divine but loved as a “concrete You; I love you by placing myself, my entire will, in the service of the You” (2009b, p. 169).

In the Christian community, then, individuals approach one another in relationships of responsibility open to encountering one another and Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer thus points to the concreteness of this encounter, stating that “*action in accordance with Christ is action in accord with reality*” (2009a, p. 229). This precludes the possibility of approaching the embodied human lives of those around us with abstracted ideals in order to force them upon one another, as I have stressed throughout. The content of this mutual encounter is the love of God, embodied in Jesus Christ’s concrete embrace of the *real* human. Thus, the encounter with the other must embrace the reality of said other (p. 233). Christ is *Christ for us today* when we encounter one another, within the community, as bound and responsible for the “concrete neighbor” (p. 221). This is the mutual encounter.

DISABILITY AS THE SITE FOR ENCOUNTER: A WAY FORWARD

Throughout this essay, I have sought to retrieve Bonhoeffer’s Christologically based ethics in order to provide an alternative approach to disability from that of the commonly practiced charity model. I hope to now pull the threads together in a more explicit way, showing how Bonhoeffer’s ethics from their very foundation in the Christ-reality to the ethics of responsibility provide a robust call to a community of mutual encounter. This call, I argue, is manifested in the abandonment of charity models and by taking up communion between those with disabilities and those without in openness. This responsibility for one another frees individuals from idealized visions and expectations and leaves them open to encountering Christ in the other.

I begin with Bonhoeffer’s understanding of reality, which I have already briefly connected to the topic of disability. The reconciliation of the reality of the world and the reality of God through Jesus Christ calls the Christian into participation with the real world. This call placed upon the Christian is a call to embrace the whole world and the whole human being, just as in Christ the whole human is embraced and affirmed. Christians in the contemporary world, as such, cannot ignore the real persons with disabilities nor can the Christian understand disability through idealistic lenses. A Christian approach to disability must *participate* in the lives of those with disabilities without hesitation and embrace the reality that is before them. Since the whole of human life is grounded within the reality of Christ, our attempts at using idealism and reason to mediate these relationships fall short of corresponding to reality. The isolated individual is not the site of ethics or encounter, rather the site of ethics and encounter is the responsible person bearing all of humanity (Bonhoeffer, 2009a, p. 258). Such idealistic mediations are present largely in the medical approaches to disability which seek to judge what is truly human and what is not, placing an *unrealistic* boundary on what human lives are allowed to live. “The group of human beings gathered today under the label ‘disabled,’ whether born or unborn, announce an end to the need to draw boundaries between them and us” (Brock, 2019, p. 95). To correspond to the reality of Jesus Christ becoming *truly human*, the Christian life must not disengage with the lived experiences of those with disabilities. This reality also indicates that those with disabilities cannot be seen as merely passive agents in the Christian life and participation with reality, but rather they too are invited into such participation. Thus, the groundwork for a mutual openness to encountering Christ in encountering one another is laid.

Anthropologically, it is in Jesus Christ that we find what is truly human. Specifically, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ takes upon the definite shape of the *real* human being rather than one of the ideal body/mind. Thus, humanity cannot be judged or externally treated as an object based on subjective criteria such as success, utility, health, or notions of perfection. Additionally, humanity is recognized *before* God and *for* others. The interdependence of humanity points to the reality that it is within community Christ is manifested for us today, that is, it is only in the context of “*us*” that Christ is *Christus pro me*. Christ is present totally in the whole human being within the community. Thus, Wannewetsch emphasizes the threefold formulae in Bonhoeffer’s work: *Christus praesens, totus Christus, Christus pro me...* (2010, p. 84). Through Christ and the ecclesiological realities of His Body, “we come

to understand the mechanisms of divine work of freeing humans so that they can image God” (Brock, 2016, p. 450).

Bonhoeffer’s discussion on the relation between the ultimate and penultimate allows us to preserve the particularities of each individual within the community. These differences and particularities become penultimate as a result of Jesus Christ taking on the reality of humanity, oriented towards Him. However, as I illustrated above, the differences and particularities must be understood in light of the ultimate and never absolutized nor neglected. The penultimate is “tested against the eschatological realities of God’s coming kingdom,” where the teleological end and limit to these differences are both affirmed and found (Swinton, 2010, p. 305). Relationships that necessitate certain levels of dependence are transfigured from *sites of idealization* and abuse to *sites of participation* in the Christ-reality and openness to a mutual encounter of Jesus Christ as manifested in responsibility to one another. How might we narrate the participation of those whose agency is not immediately recognizable? As explained above, Bonhoeffer’s understanding presented in *Sanctorum Communio* of the Christologically mediated encounter points us toward the ways in which Christ bridges the isolating and idealizing gap between individuals, creating the concrete *I-You-relation*. For those who do not visibly have the agency to participate, it may be argued that Christ’s claim upon this particular reality opens the door to the particular agencies of the individual. Though an individual in the relation without disabilities may be able to more actively show their participation in the encounter, Christ’s embrace of the *real* human means that participation of the individual with intellectual disabilities is also embraced in encounter regardless of whether or not their agency is visible to the able-bodied/minded. As Brock pointedly reveals, “a wider range of human experiences become comprehensible as the means of Jesus Christ’s appearing and claiming individuals if he is understood as the source of the many absolutely particular invitations to wonder that invite people into creaturely life” (2019, p. 161). Persons are embraced for the creatures they are meant to be when the idealistic notions are abolished by the mediating power of Jesus’ embrace of humanity. When confronted by Christ’s reality with how we have idealized persons and levels of visible agency, we are able to encounter those whose agency is less visible with the “wonder of life,” that is, we receive an openness to the ways in which they *do* participate in life together (Ibid.).

The historicity of humanity necessitates our interrelatedness and interdependence upon one another. Individuals are responsible for those placed before them, the real human being, over and against the desire to be

responsible only in certain ideal conditions. Indeed, “we do not create the conditions for our action” or manipulate situations to fit those conditions but rather “find ourselves already placed within them” (Bonhoeffer, 2009a, p. 267). In the context of community, those with disabilities and those without them are freed from these ideal expectations toward an openness to encounter Christ within one another. We approach the concrete other in love, not as a site of idealism or pity but as a site of encountering Christ. This openness counters models built on charity and pity because it sees the real human other as equally participatory in the reality of Christ regardless of arbitrary levels of capacity or capability. This moves beyond mere inclusivity which has only the teleological end of mere presence, but rather points to the possibility of communion and “mutual upbuilding” (Brock, 2019, p. 203). Disability becomes the site of *mutual encounter* with Jesus Christ where we learn what it means to be *truly human*.

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