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## **A Missiology of Love: *in Action***

**Wendy L. Fletcher<sup>1</sup>**

**A**s we celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Continental Reformation, we cannot help but observe that we are living in a generation of change for Protestant churches in the West which is almost as dramatic as the seismic shifts of the Reformation era. As we experience the continuing decline in membership and the shift of Christian voice to the margins of our culture, we are confronted with significant missiological questions.

Framing the missiological dilemma, we see that for large segments of Western culture Christianity is no longer seen as a viable or necessary path for meaning-making, nor as a helpful vehicle for framing the context of their lives. Is this a problem? Does it matter that Christianity is slipping to the edge of consciousness and contribution in North American society?

For those who believe that the Christian gospel has something to offer contemporary society the answer to this question is most definitely yes. For those worried about the decline and potential death of Christian institutions the answer is also yes. I want to affirm my adherence to the first contention while disassociating myself from the second. Why?

I disassociate myself from the second concern, as it is my belief that our institutional preoccupation with survival has reflected a kind of self-interest which is foreign to the intention of Jesus' message. Indeed, in our complex negotiations aimed at survival over the past three decades, we have often set our focus on something which is the anti-thesis of the gospel: self-preservation as a goal ahead of the willingness to lose all for the gospel's sake, to die for love of the other as Jesus did, in sure and certain hope of a resurrection which would amaze us with the 'new' it would bring.

On the other hand, I wholeheartedly embrace the first contention. We have only to turn on the evening news and watch the complex, multi-faceted maw of hatred and terror pressing into the heart of our world in its varied forms, to see the contribution which a gospel of reconciliation, such as we embrace in the cross can offer. Of course, Christians are not the only voices gathering around the work of love in our culture. Indeed, Canadian society has framed itself around the values of respect for difference and a commitment to inclusion, to the principles of equity and justice in all quarters of our society. History teaches us, however, that we have a long way to go in creating the world in practice which we have imagined in law. A lengthy history of legalized, systemic and personal racism reinforced by varied political economic power interests has meant that the Canadian story has lived a long way from its self-defined intentions. In our commitment to the creation of a genuinely just, humane and accountable society every voice is needed. The Christian voice adds its meaning to this symphony of hope for a better world in a unique cadence, grounded as it is in an ethic of forgiveness, as the necessary vehicle for the healing of history and the creation and maintenance of a 'good' society.

So then, committed to the idea that the witness of the Christian gospel has a necessary contribution to make to the world as it is, the question then become: how shall we live? How

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do we understand our discipleship such that our witness can be meaningfully added to the discourse of this hour? What has gone wrong with the story that we find ourselves unheard?

There are many ways to frame the project of Christian witness. Each generation has articulated the project of witness in its own way. Basic missiological theory holds that there must be a meeting place for communication of the gospel to take place. The hearer must have a shared or recognizable ground on which to meet the intention of the speaker, to receive the message. I argue here, that the primary dilemma which we face as Christians in this context lies here. In prior eras matters of doctrine and ritual may have appropriately been the focus of theological energy. However, in this age, the primary theological question is not one of correct doctrine or ritual. It is one of *reception*. If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, did it fall? Yes of course. But: so what? Apart from a witness, an event has no meaning. The witness participates in the event, engages the experience, interprets and assimilates it, is changed by it and reflects it as part of a larger story.

I believe that we know *what* we shall communicate: the story of faith as the good news that life has the final word. We proclaim with our gospel that love is stronger than hatred and that in the community gathered around this meaning we live/bear the good news of God in Christ. All is forgiven and reconciled in the cross. The challenge for us now rather than *what* is *how*. *How* we shall communicate the gospel of good news in Jesus such that we can be heard in our current context? How shall we communicate such that our communication creates a witness to the event the Christians affirm? How shall we communicate such that the Word we bear can be understood?

The *how* lies I believe in *action* as our primary missiological work. As a vehicle for elaborating this idea we turn now to the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as our guide.

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer

It is my contention that the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer holds a very significant key for the elaboration of a missiological model which can sustain us in this current generation. Together let us explore what Bonhoeffer is saying to us today, and then expand on his thinking through the elaboration of his key concept of *action*. His final thinking on what he himself meant by action was cut short by his early death.

Bonhoeffer argues for a church which is both deeply committed to its own tradition through the study of Scripture, prayers, rites and creeds of the Christian faith (*the arcane discipline of the hidden community*) and which perhaps paradoxically relates to the world with a radical proselytization ... a proselytization which is wordless. Rather than speaking words of faith into a culture for which the words have no meaning, Bonhoeffer summons the community of faith to be the broken body of Christ in the world, for disciples to en flesh the meaning of a crucified and risen Lord in their very bodies, as the only means of reaching toward the world in a generation such as ours. Bonhoeffer, then, imagines for us a church which is both deeply embedded in the history from which it comes, and simultaneously freed from the harm caused by that history, as it reaches toward the world in wordless evangelization, a missiology of action, a life of lived rather than publicly spoken incarnation.

Beyond the *either/or* hermeneutical frames of both sectarian withdrawal from society, and an emergent vision which embraces Spirit as primary and risks the abandonment of the core dimensions of Christian faith, Bonhoeffer is a man of *both/and* theology. His rule of life as articulated in his final writings, gathered together by his friend

and brother-in-law Eberhard Bethge and known to us as the *Letter and Papers From Prison* might be summarized as this: *pray and act*. Both frame the parameters of the Christian life.

### A – perhaps unnecessary-- word about Bonhoeffer's Context:

Bonhoeffer's theology, as with all theology, cannot be understood apart from the historical context in which it is found. Bonhoeffer was a German theologian born into considerable social privilege. He died in a Nazi prison camp in April, 1945 at the age of 38 after two years of incarceration for his participation in the *Abwehr* resistance movement which had sought to overthrow Hitler and his regime. Bonhoeffer spent his adult life as a Lutheran pastor and theologian. He was a seminal participant in the development of the *Confessing Church*, a group of Protestant pastors who insisted that commitment to Jesus Christ ahead of Hitler was an essential principal of Christianity. However, he parted company with other members of this resistant church for not going far enough in its opposition to National Socialism. Rather than saying Jesus is Lord, as articulated in the Barmen Confession, Bonhoeffer would go on to insist that we need to live Jesus as Lord as more than as a simply confessional statement. To *live* Jesus as Lord would in the end cost something significantly more than signing a faith statement. In the end, he critiqued the very *Confessing Church* he had helped to develop for its unwillingness to risk its own life and survival through opposing the policies of National Socialism which had consequences more far reaching than the life of the church, most notably its racial policies. It was his own commitment to action beyond confession, and resistance beyond the arena of theological declaration which led to his eventual imprisonment and death. In other words, in his choices he himself modelled the theological paradigm to which he summoned the church of his era and, I believe, of ours.

### Bonhoeffer's Writings

The use of Bonhoeffer's theology by a broad range of theological perspectives has been constrained by selectivity. Theologians have tended to shore up their theological positions by drawing from one segment or another of Bonhoeffer's writings. For example, theologians have borrowed terms such as *religionless Christianity* and *world come of age* from the fragmentary last letters of Bonhoeffer, without situating them in the broader context of his earlier writings. Likewise, those who would argue for a Christian community which inclines toward disengagement from the world have drawn selected texts from his earlier work without broader reference to his later work and the story of his own life choices.

To interpret Bonhoeffer's meaning, several key works must be considered in relation to each other. Each of the works referred to here were written during the time of National Socialism. Given his relatively short life, most of his published work derives from the era of Hitler's Germany, with his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* published in 1927 as a key exception. Here, his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, collected and published after his death for the first time in 1951 will be interpreted in relation to his earlier works from the decade between 1932 and 1942: *Cost of Discipleship*, written between 1935 and 1936 and first published in 1937; *Life Together*, written in one month in September, 1938 and published for the first time in 1939; *Ethics*, developed in the years immediately prior to his arrest in 1943 but never finished, first published in 1949.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Discipleship* conceived in 1932, the year Hitler rose to power was not written and published until some years later. It reflects Bonhoeffer's own leadership in resistance to National Socialism predominantly through

## What is the Church?

Last words in any story are important. Among the last words written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a short piece entitled, *Outline for a Book*. In this brief text we are able to see Bonhoeffer's near to final reflections on the church and the questions which, for him, remained to be answered.

He concluded that the church is only the church when it is there for others.<sup>3</sup> He named the key vices of the church as hubris, worship of power, envy and illusionism. He argued for the needed virtues: moderation, authenticity, trust, faithfulness, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, modesty, contentment.<sup>4</sup> He summoned the church to engagement with the world as participation in the tasks of the world not, "by dominating but by helping and serving."<sup>5</sup> He argued that the church's word gains weight and power, "not through concepts but by example." It is only through being the broken body of Christ in and for the world that the meaning of the Christian gospel can be communicated.

Bonhoeffer summons the church to faith, but a radical faith, a faith which participates in the being of Jesus in every form- his being human, his cross and resurrection. He argues in his *Outline* that our relationship with God is no "religious" relationship to "some highest, most powerful and best being imaginable."<sup>6</sup> Such a relationship for him bears no genuine transcendence. But rather, Bonhoeffer summons us as the church to a new life in being there for others through participation in the being of Jesus.

In the close to last words of Bonhoeffer, we see his earlier theology of incarnation reaffirmed. In his *Ethics*, drawing on the work of Luther he turned the theology of incarnation on its head, arguing that the meaning of Jesus was not that we by his example change our form and become divine but rather that our true dignity was to be truly human, as Jesus according to the Chalcedonian definition was truly human.<sup>7</sup> The centrality of this deeply incarnational Christology in Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology cannot be overstated. However, as critical to his thought as his commitment to the humanity of Jesus was, his affirmation of that humanity in the context of the larger project of God's redemption of the world is equally so. The humanism of Bonhoeffer was clearly a Christian humanism. In other words, his humanism was not only anthropological but also ontological, whereby the reconciliation of God and the world is achieved through the action and initiative of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

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an extended reflection on the *Sermon on the Mount*. *Life Together*. *Life Together* was written as a reflection coming out of Bonhoeffer's experience of having run the illegal confessing Church seminary at Finkenwalde for two years. *Ethics* functions as Bonhoeffer's magnum opus. Unlike *Discipleship* it looks beyond the struggle of the Church to the time beyond the war when the world would be engaged in the tasks of reconstruction and the responsibilities of Christians in and to that world. *Letter and Papers from Prison* collect the existing correspondence between Bonhoeffer, Eberhard Bethge and other key individuals during his imprisonment at Tegel Prison.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8: Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 503. Bonhoeffer makes the radical but apparently offhand comment here that as a first step the church must give away all of its property to those in need and that its clergy should live not on salary but on the freewill offering of their congregations or employed in secular vocations.

<sup>4</sup> LPP, "Outline for a Book," 503

<sup>5</sup> LPP, 503.

<sup>6</sup> LPP, 500.

<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6: Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ethics*, 7.

To BE the body of Christ in the world is the church's project for Bonhoeffer. Any attempt to interpret Bonhoeffer as a sectarian secessionist arguing for the withdrawal of Christians from the world misses the larger framework of his theology which debunks a particular rendition of the two kingdoms theology which he inherited as part of his Lutheranism. In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer spent considerable energy on deconstructing Luther's notion that there are two worlds, one God's and one secular. Writing in the context of National Socialism, Bonhoeffer was deeply concerned that the church not excuse itself from responsibility in the secular realm by relying on a false dichotomy between sacred and secular. He wrote that Christian ethics is about, "participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God."<sup>9</sup>

### Religionless Christianity

So we see then that for Bonhoeffer consistently across the last decade of his thought, the Christian community belongs in the world. The next question for us, then is how? Engaging the world as a missiological project has long been the perceived intention of the church's *raison d'être*. The contribution of Bonhoeffer's reflections on *religionless Christianity*, however, invite the church to rethink the form of that missiological project, beyond a word based proselytization, or invective to right belief, toward an engaged spiritual practice whereby we lose our life to help others find theirs, to participate in the reconciliation of all things in God.

There are actually very few uses of the term *religionless Christianity* in the *Letters and Papers from Prison* (the only place in Bonhoeffer's writing where the term appears).<sup>10</sup> I contend that the heart of its usage can be found in a letter which he wrote to Eberhard Bethge on April 30, 1944. In this letter he struggles with the question of what Christianity is for us, who is Christ for us today. For Bonhoeffer these two things are inseparable. As he struggles with this relationship between a Christology and an ecclesiology (which together frame his ethics) for his era, he does several things: he affirms the emerging critique of religion which he has read in the work of his colleague and friend Karl Barth; he critiques Barth for not going far enough and affirming in the end a positivism of revelation; he argues that the world of modernity has become essentially *defacto* religionless; he proposes the idea that those who claim to be religious in the Christian world in fact are, "the last of the knights of a few intellectually dishonest people."<sup>11</sup>

The mistake to be avoided here is any notion that because Bonhoeffer posits the end of religion he is arguing for the end of Christianity, the community of Christians, the body of Christ as gathered community or the real presence of Christ himself in the world. Instead, he summons the Christian community to a far more radical form of engagement with, and practice of, its faith. Bonhoeffer goes on to pose this key question:

How can Christ become Lord of the religionless as well? Is there such a thing as a religionless Christian? ... How do we speak (or perhaps we can no longer 'speak' the way we used to) in a 'worldly' way about God? How do we go about being 'religionless

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<sup>9</sup> *Ethics*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> *LPP*, 361-367. The observations included here are all drawn from the letter dated April 30, 1944.

<sup>11</sup> *LPP*, 362.

worldly' Christians, how can we be ecclesiastically those who are called out, without understanding ourselves religiously as privileged instead seeing ourselves belonging wholly to the world? Christ then would be no longer the object of religion, but something else entirely, truly lord of the world? But what does that mean? In a religionless situation what do ritual and prayer mean? Is this where the 'arcane discipline' or the difference ... between the penultimate and the ultimate have new significance?<sup>12</sup>

The core of Bonhoeffer's intention is revealed in this one passage. Christ is Lord of the world. The categories of religion, religious language and religious practice have not only become meaningless in modernity, they have impeded the communication of the meaning of Christ in and to the world.

Briefly in the *Letters and Papers from Prison* Bonhoeffer uses the term '*world come of age*.' With his use of this term, he observes that God has been pushed out of the world by modernity, that the world of modernity no longer has need of God to answer its questions.<sup>13</sup> Observing that liberal Christianity has tried in the face of Enlightenment losses to make a defence of the world's need for God, he argues against apologetic. Rather than defending God, trying to make an apologetic which offers God as a panacea to the weak, Bonhoeffer argues that the question of Jesus Christ in a *world come of age* requires a different tact. Rather than 'smuggling God in somewhere,' he advocates a truer recognition of our situation before God.<sup>14</sup> The truth and particularity of our situation as he sees it, is that the same God who makes us to live in the world without the hypothesis of God is the same God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God.

Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and suffering of God; only suffering God can help. To this extent one may say that the previously described development of the world's coming of age, which has cleared the way by eliminating a false notion of God, frees us to see the God of the Bible who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless.<sup>15</sup>

So we see then that key to understanding Bonhoeffer's notion of *religionless Christianity* is what he understands *religious* to mean. He does not confuse the core practices of faith in community with religion. He separates them from what he defines as religion, and religious meaning. For Bonhoeffer, to interpret religiously is to interpret, "*metaphysically on the one hand and individualistically on the other*."<sup>16</sup> The community of Christ is called to interpret communally and in the context of this world. From this distinction follows Bonhoeffer's intention with regard to *religionless Christianity* and continuing life in faith.

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<sup>12</sup> LPP, 363-364.

<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer himself did not coin the phrase *world come of age*. He had encountered it while reading Dilthey's *Weltanschauung und Analyses* and in his correspondence with Bethge considers its ramifications for Christianity in the age of modernity.

<sup>14</sup> LPP, 478.

<sup>15</sup> LPP, 478.

<sup>16</sup> LPP, 372.



## Naming Three Practices

So how then, do we practice the meaning and presence of Christ as believers without replicating the errors of religious history? In the first instance, we must reconfigure our relationship to power, as is suggested by Bonhoeffer's understanding of where God stands in relation to history. Secondly, Bonhoeffer hypothesizes that we may not be able to use words at all. *action* must be the form which articulates the gospel. Thirdly, he argues that we must practice what he has referred to elsewhere as the, "arcane discipline" of the Christian community. It is in these three thoughts that we can find the heart of both the missiological and ecclesiological dimensions of his latest theological voice.

### \*Deconstructing Power

The problem of Christianity's relationship to power throughout its history is a concern that occupies Bonhoeffer through the decade of the 1930's. In *Discipleship* in particular he considers the ways in which the church has subverted the work of God through close association with use of power as self-interest.<sup>17</sup> By the time of his imprisonment his accusation to the church of the destructive implications of its collusion with power out of self-interest – is clear. His point is this: the ethical question for the disciple must always be, what is the will of God? At no point should the Christian concern themselves with questions which are referential to the self or its interest, for to do so frames self and world as the ultimate realities. The body of Christ is summoned to, "live an ethic which presupposes a decision about ultimate reality, namely a decision of faith."<sup>18</sup>

### \*Action: Silent Proselytization

Bonhoeffer's concern with traditional forms of word based proselytization are not unique to his later correspondence. Rather, in earlier works we see him struggling with the very question of words and evangelization. In *Discipleship*, he proscribes clear limits to the idea of Christian witness as verbal or impressed proselytization.

But it is not only judging words which are forbidden to the disciples. Proclaiming salvific words of forgiveness to others also has its limits. Jesus' disciples do not have the power or right to force them on anyone at any time. All our urging, running after people, proselytizing, every attempt to accomplish something in another person by our own power is vain and dangerous.<sup>19</sup>

From very early in his writing, Bonhoeffer understood that the vocation of the Christian community as it related to the world had more to do with action than words:

God will not ask us someday whether our confession was evangelical, but whether we did God's will. God will ask that of everyone, including us...The former justify themselves by their confession; the latter, the doers, are the people who obediently trust in God's grace. People's speech here is correlated with their self-righteousness,

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<sup>17</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Volume 4: Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 46-50.

<sup>18</sup> *Ethics*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Discipleship*, 172.



and their deeds are correlated with that grace, before which people cannot do anything else except humbly obey and serve.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the years of National Socialism Bonhoeffer was consistent in his theology that the Christian gospel was something to be lived and practiced in the first and last instance. In 1932 as Hitler rose to power, he was raising questions about the limits of Christian proselytization as speech act. Twelve years later as he approached the end of his own life he had expanded that view to exclude the possibility of speech as a regular Christian practice in the generation of which he was apart.

In Bonhoeffer's early text on discipleship he writes at length about the cost of discipleship. He talks about "cheap grace" as the mortal enemy of the church, as the justification of the sin but not of the sinner. He denounces a church which preaches forgiveness of sins as though it had the capacity to offer grace on its own, a church which offers the comfort of grace without repentance.<sup>21</sup> He argues that discipleship of the baptized is bound to the suffering of Christ.<sup>22</sup> The Christian life summons us to live as a self-offering toward the well-being of the world on the example of Christ. Our joy and our purpose are realized in the companionship we make with the Christ in this journey.

In a reflection which he wrote on the occasion of the Baptism of his nephew and godson Dietrich Bethge in May, 1944, Bonhoeffer states this clearly:

Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, must be silenced and we can be Christian in only two ways: through prayer and in doing justice among human beings.<sup>23</sup>

Bonhoeffer does believe that a new day will come when speech will be meaningful again. He postulates, however, that it will be a new language and perhaps a non-religious language and that that day is not yet.

## Arcane Discipline

The form of discipleship which Bonhoeffer is calling for in his idea of *religionless Christianity* does not stand on the one leg of action in the world alone. Rather it stands firstly, squarely in the practice of what he refers to as the *arcane discipline* of the hidden or secret community. The form of radical enfleshed self-giving discipleship for which he calls cannot be realized without the grace and empowerment of God. It also cannot be realized alone. This

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<sup>20</sup> *Discipleship*, 179.

<sup>21</sup> *Discipleship*, 43. "Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, as a principle, as a system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God's love as merely a Christian idea of God. Those who affirm it have already had their sins forgiven. The church that teaches this doctrine of grace thereby confers such grace on itself. The world finds in this church a cheap cover-up for its sins, for which there is no remorse and from which it has even less desire to be set free. Cheap grace is, thus, denial of God's living words, denial of incarnation of the word of God."

<sup>22</sup> *Discipleship*, 89.

<sup>23</sup> *LPP*, 389.

means than that Bonhoeffer summons the discipleship community to live communally: beyond the individualism of modernity, prayerfully, eucharistically and biblically.

Bonhoeffer is clear that in and of ourselves we do not have the capacity for the imperative of self-giving to which the gospel draws us. The questions the gospel poses in the end are not questions for the individual.<sup>24</sup> For him, the biblical witness demonstrates our fundamental concern as related to the righteousness of God and God's Kingdom here on earth. What matters is not what is beyond this world but rather how this world is reconciled and renewed. Toward that end God empowers us in community, through the body of Christ to live our vocation.

The need for the church to be open to the world by existing for others does not imply surrender, either of its identity or of the mystery of faith in Christ, for Bonhoeffer.<sup>25</sup> The work then was for the community of Christ to so live together, that the mysteries of faith would be not only protected from profanation but also remain as living empowerment for the work and being of the body of Christ. Toward that end, in his letters sent from Tegel Prison, he writes about the need for the church to recover the '*arcane discipline*' of the early church. In particular, he insists that prayer, worship, the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist and the creed, along with intensive study of the Scriptures should be safeguarded at the centre of the community's life. A fuller elaboration of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the necessary practices of community life for Christians is found in his earlier work *Life in Community*. From that text, we are able to flesh out Bonhoeffer's meaning of the *arcane discipline* as he envisioned its application.<sup>26</sup>

Bonhoeffer was adamant that these hidden realities should not be forced upon the world. The world would know the church only through its self-offering and service in the world, its working for reconciliation, peace and justice. The virtues which empowered disciples for this life in the world would be nurtured through the maintenance of ancient practices and the rituals of faith in the hidden life of the community.

## Both/And

We see then, in opposition to any notion of Christian secession from the world, that Bonhoeffer argues very clearly for a radical form of engagement with the world in a self-offering if not self-sacrificing form as an expression of the work of God's reconciliation in creation. We see as well, in opposition to any notion that the core wisdom and practices of Christian tradition should be discarded in favour of something new, that Bonhoeffer argues passionately for the retention of those core aspects of Christian tradition which he believes are necessary for the empowerment of the community as it struggles to find its way to faithful discipleship in each succeeding generation. Most notably Bonhoeffer retains a clear sight about the reliance of the community of Jesus: "Christian community means community

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<sup>24</sup> LPP, 372. "Hasn't the individualistic question of saving our personal souls almost faded away for most of us? ...Isn't God's righteousness and kingdom on earth the centre of everything?"

<sup>25</sup> LPP, 29. Editor's commentary.

<sup>26</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Volume 5: Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 30-32. "Therefore Christians need other Christians who speak God's Word to them. They need them again and again when they become disheartened because living by their own resources, they cannot help themselves without cheating themselves out of the divine word of salvation."

through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this and none that is less than this."<sup>27</sup>

## Moving Forward with Bonhoeffer's Thinking on Action

At the beginning of our discourse, I observed that the critical theological project with reference to missiology at this juncture in our cultural narrative is a matter of **reception**. How will we communicate the meaning of the Christian gospel in and to our cultures such that there is a ground for meeting, understanding, and reception of the gospel's intent? Bonhoeffer's identification of the action as not only the primary but **only** suitable vehicle for addressing the culture in the aftermath of misuse of power by our churches in various forms is the beginning place.

Given the brevity of his elaboration on the topic of action we are left to surmise what this might mean for us in our contexts. He names the importance of action aimed at social justice making. I postulate however that the forms of action most needed and potentially fruitful in terms of missiological communication as a work of healing and reconciliation are three-fold: *political; personal; aesthetic*.

## Political Action

Political action, as I use the term here, refers to anything which engages the public square. The range of activity covers that which lies in the expressly political realm but also the social, environmental and economic. Political action in this frame includes but is not limited to: public protest, acts of solidarity with the oppressed in a variety of forms; letter writing; public statements; financial gifts in support of change and lobbying for economic change and action; supporting sanctions against unjust regimes, employees, corporations. In other words, political action aimed at re-making the social, political, environmental and economic order according to the gospel ethic of respect and dignity for all persons and care for creation is the kind of communication which Bonhoeffer himself most strongly advocates as a means of missiological communication.

## Personal Action

Although Bonhoeffer does not discuss action in the personal realm, I understand it to be critical to the project of a missiology of love such as Jesus himself models. The particularity of the gospel which draws our eyes to that which is right in front of us, also demands action in the personal realm which is immediate and specific. Following a God, as we do, who knows us intimately from the very act of our creation to our end our gaze is turned toward the personal. If every hair on our head is numbered and precious, so too is the hair on the head of our neighbour.

Writing in the early fourteenth century, medieval mystic Meister Eckhart captures this sentiment beautifully as he writes:

The most important hour is this hour. The most important person is the one standing in front of you. The most important work is love."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Life Together*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> "The Talks of Instruction" in *Selected Writings of Meister Eckhart*, ed. David Oliver (New York: Penguin, 1994), 1-53.

As human beings we are embedded in the immediate and the personal. Radical acts of love which express compassion for and solidarity with the suffering of the one who is immediately before us is arguable the most effective missiological communication of all. We know love when we experience it. We are converted by love, drawn by love- not an emotion written on a Hallmark card- but love as action which draws us toward inclusion, welcome, forgiveness, companionship. When one acts for the well-being of the other- one who is beyond the self the interest of the self- the recipient of the act is not only changed but also all who witness such an act. When one loves the one immediately before the prospect of a movement toward justice more broadly construed is enacted.

## Aesthetic Action

Human beings are a people of story. The stories we tell about ourselves define our identities, our meaning, our purpose in this world. The stories of the community of faith shape our past, sustain our present and inspire our future. Jesus understood this. He taught predominantly through the use of story. He helped others understand through the use of story. Recent schools of thought in homiletics understand that the effective use of story is essential to a meaningful homiletic practice. Theologians and historians have developed whole genres of narrative as new pathways for interpreting the disciplines they practice. Even so, however, traditional forms of communicating the Christian gospel with the use of narrative directly (spoken or written word as sermon or text) have not opened up pathways of understanding between Christianity and non-Christian culture in significant measure.

Working for more than thirty years as professor in Canadian universities, I observe that this generation of learners is incredibly visual. Through the advent of smartphones always tethered to the wrist of learners, and the rapid development of social media as a primary vehicle for communication, the balance of words relative to image as a vehicle for communication has shifted.

Of course this is not a new story. From the earliest years of Christian witness, though the middle ages beyond the Reformation, populations exposed to the Christian message largely were illiterate. As such, visual imagery in a variety of forms became the primary conduit for carrying the meaning of Christianity into the public sphere. Whether through the wall paintings and mosaics of the early church, the stained glass windows of the medieval church, or the cartoons of the Reformation era Christian leaders understood the power of the visual in communicating broadly. This is a wisdom that the advent of the Enlightenment undermined. As most people in Western culture learned to read and write, written forms of communication and discourse dominated modes of Christian expression. Today's generation of learners is moving in the opposite direction. Increasingly, in the arena of popular culture symbols, images, emoticons and graphics populate the genre of self-expression and meaning-making.

Some years ago I began my own journey as an artist. This was a significant dimension of my mid-life healing. However, on that path I discovered something: people were 'hearing' my paintings. I was pouring myself, my understanding and my hope into them and as others viewed them they 'experienced' them.

At an exhibition of my work in Kunming, China, my work was shared with a large audience of people who had virtually no connection to the Christian story. The series of

paintings was entitled “East meets West- A Confucian conversation.” The eighteen paintings identified key concepts present in Confucianism, Western humanism, and Christianity, such as love, courage, generosity, respect and do on. As they stood in front of my art, young person after young person said things like:

“When I look at this my heart goes up”

“When I see this I feel like I can keep going – I feel encouraged”

“When I look at this I don’t feel afraid anymore”

“When I look at this I feel – I am not sure what the word is – hope?”

As I watched these young people consider the paintings, I realized that the paintings were preaching. Without language, the very heart of the gospel as I understand it was speaking to them, in a way which they could not only understand, but which in some way changed them. It was then that I understood: if we are going to communicate across generations, cultures, and languages we must find that missiological meeting place beyond the limitations of the intellectual and the linguistic, toward that space in the human being where the very heart lives. The aesthetic pathway is, in my view, one significant place where such communication remains not only possible but in need of resurrection as a primary Christian form in our generation.

The pathway of aesthetic action is not only about fine art. The possibility of this pathway embraces all forms of visual culture including the various mechanism of popular culture through social media, as well as other aspects of the arts. Music communicates beyond idea and language in a way which is universally understood. Theatre, although dependant in part on language, accesses the key dimensions of the human being beyond words, through the use of form, space and movement. In the search for a meaning-making meeting place, our proclamation must express itself through those pathways of experience which touch the deepest and yet most inexpressible part of our humanity.

Many years ago, Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote, “The world will be saved by beauty.” Action undertaken in the aesthetic realm reflects this wisdom. The fragility of life is held on the ground of experience wherein suffering and beauty are twinned. However, as overwhelming as the suffering may seem on any given day, the two are not equal. Suffering IS ... Beauty HEALS.

The healing power of God radiates through the action of the *Beloved* (all of God’s creatures) as they reflect that which lies at the very heart of the Self, the *image of God*. God is... love itself; compassion itself; goodness itself; justice itself; truth itself; beauty itself. When we come home to God and ourselves, that heart of God speaks and reflects in us and through us to the world around us. Then communication of the gospel becomes possible, as does the healing of God’s world.

Martin Luther, as we know, was a man of many words. Theology was his passion and he spent his life in the project of interpreting the teachings of the church in ways which were faithful and accessible. And yet he *did not* say, “If the world were to end tomorrow I would write another book today.” He *did* say, “*If the world were to end tomorrow I would plant a tree today.*” Ultimately, the faith which is in us communicates most vitally when it is lived. Luther understood that faith is to be enacted.

The project of proclamation framed, beyond self-interest, as action in the political, the personal and the aesthetic opens the door for missiological communication which just may

be understood. When our tree falls in the complex, currently often hate-filled forests of this world, it may be heard, understood interpreted and re-imagined newly. It may open a space for the possibility of new growth in the place where old trees fell. With Luther and with Bonhoeffer then, may we embrace the mystifying challenges of this present hour as Jesus himself did: **in** the present responding to and acting in the world of which we are apart, always from the location of the good news which celebrates the reconciliation of all things already accomplished in God.