

THE “LIGHT ON THE HILL” PARADOX:

**HEARING THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT
WITH DIETRICH BONHOEFFER**

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INTRODUCTION: THE “LIGHT ON THE HILL” PARADOX

How are we to read the Sermon on the Mount? How are we to be disciples of Jesus? These questions are fundamentally connected. This article will argue, in conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book, *Discipleship*, that the Sermon on the Mount is, above all else, a Christological statement – a statement that places Jesus at the centre of the church community and which calls us to be with each other in the life of Christ: a concrete living out of the coming kingdom.

Though Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship* is often regarded as primarily contributing to his ecclesiology, insofar as its primary focus is on what kind of community the church is called to be, its central concern is *Christology*.¹ Assuredly, *Discipleship* is about church but, for Bonhoeffer, the church and the person of Christ are inseparable² (though this is not to collapse them into one). *Discipleship* begins with the question, “What does he [Jesus] want from us today?”³ It is a question which would later be echoed in his *Ethics*: To ask, “What is the will of God?” he would argue, is the starting point for any Christian ethic.⁴ Throughout Bonhoeffer’s whole corpus he is concerned with the presence of God in the world – to *hear* and to *see* the Word of God made flesh. This Word of God is the *Gegenlogos* (counter-word), which would confront and put to death human *logos*; which would be abandoned on a cross and yet would rise again on the third day; which would stand against National-Socialist propaganda; and which would be proclaimed throughout the world, redeeming, reconciling, and sustaining adamic humanity. For Bonhoeffer, any ecclesiological claim is, first and foremost, a *Christological* claim – centring on the incarnate Word made present by his Spirit.

However, if church is to be understood thoroughly christocentrically, then a paradox arises. In his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer notes a pointed contrast between

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Matthew 5 and Matthew 6. On the one hand, in chapter 5, the disciples are called to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth, a city on a hill, visible for all to see. On the other hand, in chapter 6, the disciples are told to give in secret, to pray behind closed doors, to fast without others knowing, to be hidden with a single-hearted righteousness. The reader is confronted with a paradox: The activity of the disciples must be seen but not for the sake of being seen.⁵ If, as a church, we are called to be light, how can we be anything other than visible? How can we be hidden and yet seen? And further, *why* should we be hidden?

It is this paradox – the “Light on the Hill” paradox – with which I am concerned in this article. I will look firstly at the visibility of being followers of Jesus. After all, the call of Jesus is an *extraordinary* call – one which necessitates the believer dying to self and

rising again in Christ. It is the call to *be* the light of the world. Secondly, I will contrast the visible nature of discipleship with the hiddenness presented in Matthew 6, exploring what this hiddenness entails and how this apparent paradox is to be reconciled in Christ. Finally, I will discuss the mediatorship of Christ in

the church and in the world. I will grapple with how the living and proclaimed Word continues to form our very existence as church community in relation to God, to others and to the world. As my argument progresses I will endeavour to suggest ways that Bonhoeffer’s paradox of a visible and hidden church community in Jesus Christ is wholly relevant to our contemporary context in Aotearoa New Zealand.

THE EXTRAORDINARY

The Sermon on the Mount is no easy passage for Christians to grapple with. Either we are to take it literally – in which case the requirements are fearfully severe. Or, we are to trivialise it and domesticate it in order to make it achievable or, at the very least, understandable. Neither option seems to offer much hope. The first, a literal interpretation, reveals the absurdity of the Christian position, thereby invalidating the commands (if we were all to cut out an eye whenever it caused us to look lustfully, surely very few Christians would retain their sight!);⁶ the second, a figurative interpretation, is to dismiss Scripture or at least to impose some

¹ Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 78.

² Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos, 2004), 35.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works (DBW) 4, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, eds. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2001), 37.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBW 6, trans. Ilse Tödt et al, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 47.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 149.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

form of eisegesis on the text. It is to say, God does not *really* mean this; God merely means *this* to serve as a metaphor for *that*. Further, no solution is given to this dilemma, only the command to do as the Sermon demands. So the temptation is to establish our own response – typically to *avoid* making any definite decision. We may even ascribe the oft misused term *divine mystery* to excuse indecision.

But maybe we have the question wrong. The vast majority of the Christian tradition has interpreted the Sermon as a new law to fulfil the old law of Moses. For Augustine, the old law binds through fear, while the new law frees by love.⁷ For Aquinas, a contrast is drawn between “the law of bondage” and the “law of liberty.”⁸ Luther stresses the dichotomy of “law” and “gospel” (and yet Lutherans can’t seem to decide into which category the Sermon falls!).⁹ N. T. Wright steps away from this dichotomising or quantitative line of reasoning by saying the Sermon stands as “a challenge to Israel to *be* Israel.”¹⁰ It is a call for the people of God to become that which they are called to be – a summons to reconciled relationship. And yet thus far the commands set out by Jesus remain frustratingly out of reach. If the Sermon is focused on what the disciples must or must not do then we are to be pitied, for who among us has the capacity to obey all the Sermon’s precepts?

For Bonhoeffer, however, the Sermon on the Mount is not so much a law to be kept or broken but a *Christological* statement. If Jesus is the focus then the Sermon is not the imposition of impossible restrictions but rather an invitation to look on him. “So far from imposing on them an intolerable yoke of legalism,” Bonhoeffer writes, “he succours them with the grace of the gospel.”¹¹ In commanding the disciples to tear out an eye should they look lustfully, Jesus is not forbidding the disciples to look at nothing but to look on *him* – the one through whom the grace of God is imparted. And yet rather than finding a scapegoat in Jesus, for Bonhoeffer “only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”¹² Put differently, only if the Sermon is primarily a Christological statement can

it be both law and gospel, both free and costly, both a *call* to follow and the consequent *way* to follow.

Being Christological the Sermon on the Mount is also fundamentally *ecclesiological*. That it is Christ who speaks, means orator and oratory cannot be separated. Though anyone can speak the truth, Christ the speaker *is* the Truth.¹³ Outside of this, the disciples have no need of the church community, and the church has no need of Christ. We could just view the Sermon as a set of personal moral standards. But the one who speaks is the one whom God declares beloved. The one who speaks the way of faithfulness is also the one who lives the perfectly faithful life, and who is the crucified and resurrected one. Because it is *Christ* who speaks the disciples are drawn in and united by Christ. The Word gathers them together in community. They cannot obey the commandments on their own so they gather around him who obeys. And as they gather around Christ they become community.

The Sermon on the Mount is a call to obedience through faith and by this act *extraordinary* community is established. Matthew 5 begins by setting the scene: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them” (Matt 5:1–2). Bonhoeffer notes that there are three distinct groups. Firstly, there is the crowd, who *see* Jesus around whom the disciples are gathered; secondly, there are the disciples, who *see* the crowd – the lost sheep of Israel – from which they have been called; and finally there is Jesus who has called each of the disciples individually and who has gathered this visible community around him. He is the Shepherd, and as they follow, they too will be rejected with him. On a sobering note, Bonhoeffer writes: “one can already see the whole history of the suffering of Jesus and his community.”¹⁴ Like the finger of John the Baptist on Mathias Grüenwald’s Isenheim Altarpiece (1512–1516),¹⁵ the opening scene of the Sermon seems to point inevitably to the cross.

So we have three groups: Christ, the disciples, and the crowd. The sermon is spoken from Jesus *to* the disciples who have been separated *from* the

7 Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville, Ky: T&T Clark, 1992), 290.

8 Aquinas alleviated the demands of the Sermon by distinguishing between “commandment” and “counsel,” the latter intended for those striving for perfection i.e. those dedicated to a religious order. *Ibid.*, 291.

9 *Ibid.*, 292.

10 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress, 1996), 288.

11 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 126.

12 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 63.

13 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Divine Rhetoric: the Sermon on the Mount as Message and as Model in Augustine, Chrysostom and Luther* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 102.

14 Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 101.

15 “Altarpiece – First view.” Online: http://www.musee-unterlinden.com/altarpiece-with-wings-closed-the-crucifixion.html?searched=isenheim&advsearch=oneword&highlight=ajaxSearch_highlight+ajaxSearch_highlight1. Accessed 26 July 2012.

crowd.¹⁶ Jesus, having seen the crowd goes up a mountain – a place of prominence and visibility – and there the disciples follow him and are taught by him. Instantly the Sermon is put in context: this is not a sermon of DIY righteousness. Nor is it a set of unattainable or unrealistic commandments with which the disciples are left to grapple alone. Rather the disciples receive Jesus’ teaching by being the distinct community that *followed* him up the mountain; that *gathered* around him and *heard* his words; that would later walk with Jesus along the path to the cross. In setting the scene, it is important to note that the words are spoken to the disciples. Jesus is here telling them what it means to follow him, to be the body of Christ.

For Bonhoeffer this Christ-gathered community is *extraordinary*.¹⁷ But in using the word *extraordinary*, Bonhoeffer intends something more than how we might use it today. It is more than merely being unusual, rare, or greater than normal. It is even more than being exceptional or outstanding. For if that is what we mean by *extraordinary* then the Beatitudes, with which Jesus’ Sermon begins, must soon reduce us to

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silence. There is a subversive difference to the blessedness Jesus advocates – a *qualitative* rather than *quantitative* difference. *Extraordinary* means something more than that which is *beyond* the ordinary. Standing apart from the ordinary, it is totally *other*. Bonhoeffer emphasises the distinctness of each group because the disciples form a visible Jesus-community that is totally foreign to the crowd.

What is the nature of this visibility that is so extraordinary? Surely, it does not find its roots among the disciples for although they follow Christ they are still human. The most they could achieve by their own merit is to be *better* than ordinary, but they would still exist within the realm of the ordinary and take their bearings from that. They could never be *extraordinary*, totally *other*, because they *see* the people from whom they have come.¹⁸ The ordinary is all they know and have been conditioned to accept as normal.

Hence the beatitudes are directed *to* the disciples, not so much as a set of rules and self-fulfilling guidelines, but solely as a result of their being in

relationship with Jesus. They are blessed “because of Jesus’ call that they followed.”¹⁹ The extraordinary, therefore, is grounded in Christ. The visibility of the disciples shines from Christ who is the light of the world (John 8:12). *Performatively* rather than inherently Christ declares the disciples the light of the world. They are not to *become* the light. Nor do they *have* the light. They *are* the light by virtue of the call Jesus has made.²⁰ Only in the act of gathering around Christ are the disciples and indeed the church the light of the world.

I will now focus briefly on the *call* of Christ, and the consequent *following*. Firstly, Christ has to have made the call – obedience is inherently responsive.²¹ This visible community is not only centred around Christ, it is *formed* and sustained by Christ and the grace of God. In *Ethics*, the language of *form* becomes important for Bonhoeffer in thinking of Christ in the here and now. Christ, who is determinative of our very reality, takes up form in the

present through the various mandates named through Scripture: work, marriage, government, and church. Christopher Holmes argues that Bonhoeffer’s use of the word *form* indicates a

dynamic understanding of Christ’s presence in the world. It is dynamic “because all people and therefore all realms or mandates are subject to God’s rule.”²² Why is this important for Jesus’ call to the disciples? It is because the Word spoken through Christ – is the very Word which was present in the beginning (John 1:1). It is because, as Holmes interprets it, God’s Word “gives rise to and determines the mandates.”²³ Every aspect of life is permeated and sustained by the Word of God through the Spirit. Not only is Jesus’ call to the disciples the *prerequisite* of their following, it is the ongoing sustenance and *form* of their discipleship. Given time and time again, a daily echo of our baptism, Christ’s call is given that we might follow; the call of grace which precedes obedience.

Secondly, the disciples have *followed*. In hearing the call, they respond. They are blessed because they are meek and have renounced “*all rights of their own* for the sake of Jesus Christ.”²⁴ This is

19 Ibid., 102.

20 Ibid., 112.

21 Mary L. Vandenberg, “Bonhoeffer’s Discipleship: Theology for the Purpose of Christian Formation,” *CTJ* 44 (2009): 345.

22 Christopher Holmes, “The Indivisible Whole of God’s Reality: on the Agency of Jesus in Bonhoeffer’s Ethics,” *IJST* 12 (2010): 287.

23 Ibid., 289.

24 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 105.

16 There is some ambiguity within the text as to whom the Sermon is addressed to (Stanton, *Gospel for a New People*, 296). But, following Bonhoeffer’s line of thinking, I have assumed Jesus is speaking to the disciples – the visible church community.

17 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 145.

18 Ibid., 100.

an extraordinary gathering – one that is totally subversive in its reasoning. The community is called to love enemies, to turn the other cheek, to walk the extra mile, to give up the cloak. How can the disciples do this unless they are willing to crucify their own rights, their own will, their own *life*? Rather than calling them to a different life, Jesus calls them to *give up* their lives, to take up their cross, to walk the way of suffering.

What relevance has this Christocentric interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount for the church in Aotearoa New Zealand? We live in a time of institutional decline. While actual church attendance figures are hard to come by, church *adherence* figures show most denominations are in decline, and have been since the mid-20th century.²⁵ Meanwhile, in the 2006 census, the number of people who indicated “no religion” increased by 5.1% from the 2001 census.²⁶ The reality is, church numbers are generally in decline, with the exception of a few pockets of revitalisation – particularly in Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations. Recently my own parish had to make the hard decision to sell one of its church buildings – a reality not unfamiliar to many parishes around the country struggling with finances and ageing congregations. The Anglican Diocese of Dunedin declared recently that it is two years from a crisis and must look at restructuring.²⁷ What are we to do with such harrowing statistics and information? The church is, according to these criteria, becoming *less* visible in our community.

To return to Matthew 5, if the Sermon is centred in the disciples then the current church climate in New Zealand is indeed harrowing and a cause for despair. But if, as we have established, the Sermon is centred in *Christ*, then the church’s visibility does not come from anything we can do. Church visibility is not about church buildings – nor is it about attendance figures. It is *from* Christ that we receive our light, and *in* Christ that we are made the light

of the world. We are made visible *not* by converting the masses, or by church planting, or by funding community projects, or by any other moves that we might make. For, despite the practical value of many of these strategies, our visibility is not inherent in them. We are made visible by hearing *Christ’s* Word, by gathering around *his* table, by participating in *his* ministry, by being in community around *him*. And all of this is done through the obedience of faith in him. If everything we do begins in Christ, then mission, being *in* the world, begins in worship. Let us not look *outward* to the work before us but *inward* to our strength and light. By looking inward to Christ, Bonhoeffer’s paradox to be both visible and hidden is sustained.

THE HIDDEN

Irrespective of the prevailing social climate, the community of disciples is *extraordinary* by virtue of its relationship to Christ. The church will always

be that regardless of any secularisation thesis which claims a privatisation of faith and the eventual decline and extinction of the church. And yet the tendency is for churches to *try* and be the light of the world – to actively work to be visible. However, such

pragmatically-centred activism would be unlikely to claim Bonhoeffer’s support. Though Bonhoeffer could certainly be labelled an activist, Larry Rasmussen is quick to remind us “[his] Christology, and not his pacifism and not his conspiracy [to assassinate Hitler], is the *cantus firmus*.”²⁸ Bonhoeffer never gives explicit theological justification for his part in attempted tyrannicide, though it could be argued he departs from the hard-lined pacifism of *Discipleship* in his later work, *Ethics*.²⁹ In my mind, this is entirely consistent with affirming with Bonhoeffer’s Christocentric theology – discipleship, and indeed theology, must always be a dynamic walk of faith, the act of each day hearing anew the call of Christ and responding. Bonhoeffer never departed from this – works and deeds must always begin in faith. Such an inclination finds its roots in Luther’s understanding of the law and the gospel. The law leads to an external righteousness based on works while the gospel is concerned with one internal work, faith, from which all external works flow. If

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25 *New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings 1971*, vol. 3, *Religious Professions* (Wellington: Department of Statistics, 1972), Table 1.

26 “Quickstats about culture and identity: Religious affiliation,” *Statistics New Zealand Tatauranga Aotearoa*. Online: <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/culture-and-identity/religious-affiliation.aspx>. Accessed 14 June 2012.

27 Ellie Constantine, “Diocese near ‘collapse,’” *Otago Daily Times*, 12 June 2012. Online: <http://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/212876/diocese-near-collapse>. Accessed 23 June 2012.

28 Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 94.

29 *Ibid.*, 120.

faith in God is the cause of our righteousness, then our righteousness is primarily *hidden*.³⁰

In Matthew's Gospel, we must somehow reconcile the "extraordinariness" of chapter 5 with the contrasting "hiddenness" of chapter 6. Directly after the call to love one's enemies comes the instruction to "beware of practicing your piety before others" (Matt 6:1). It seems contradictory for Jesus to preach such a radical message that would by virtue of its radical nature be inherently visible, and then suddenly to turn around and give a warning against showiness. If we are to be the light of the world, surely we are going to be ostentatious, regardless of our intentions because light is ontologically visible. But, Bonhoeffer argues, by being the extraordinary there is a danger "that the disciples will completely misunderstand this as a command to start building a heavenly kingdom on earth, despising and destroying the world order."³¹ Jesus was never a warmonger, nor an extremist, nor a revolutionary. He did not incite violent rebellion. Contrary to expectations, resistance was of the "creative and non-violent" kind.³² How nonsensical that the king would enter Jerusalem on a donkey. How unthinkable that victory would be found in defeat and death. How irrational that the kingdom would come through helpless babe. How unreasonable that the visible would be found in the hidden. How *extraordinary*!

The extraordinary is *out of* the ordinary. It is *God's* reason to our limited reason. As such we expect it to be infinitely greater – and it is. But our conception of greatness is so often placed on an exponential scale of human experience. In other words, we conceptualise what is greatest and then we place God even above that. The problem with this is that, *humanly* defined, we are still placing the extraordinary on the same human scale. But in the man Jesus Christ our reason – our definitions – have been put to death. No longer do we need to *conceptualise* the glory of God. The concept has become the real: the Word has become flesh. The glory of God is revealed – not as the infinitely great but as the infinitely humble.

The question Bonhoeffer then raises is, "from whom should the visibility of discipleship be

hidden?"³³ The answer is not from others – by being a city shining on a hill we will be inherently visible. More to the point, the visibility of our discipleship should be hidden *from ourselves*. The title Bonhoeffer chose for his book is *Nachfolge* – to follow after. This is, for Bonhoeffer, the key to discipleship: that disciples "should keep on following Jesus, and should keep looking forward to him who is going before them... not at themselves and what they are doing."³⁴ In faith, they are never looking upon themselves but to Christ, the one whom they follow. Their deeds are merely the *response* of hearing God's word and being attentive to Christ through the work of the Spirit. And who is this Christ, the one whom they follow? He is the humiliated One. The crucified One. The *extraordinary* is found in the selfless giving of Christ on the cross. Only in understanding this, and only in living according to this new reality, can we truly be both extraordinary *and* hidden.

But Christ is not just the humiliated One and the crucified One. He is also the *risen* One. As such, Christ speaks to us exactly as he spoke to his disciples.³⁵ Like them, we only recognise and follow Christ through his spoken word and command through the power of the Holy Spirit. Never should Christians

understand works as *continuing* the ministry of Christ, as if it has fallen to them. Christian works are, and always will be, a *participation*, in the ministry of the risen Christ, in faith and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Being *hidden*, therefore, is the process of moving the centre from us to Christ. It is an acknowledgment of the risen Christ, mediating *for us* and living *for us*.

Properly understood, this offers a radical critique of our preoccupation with "relevance." Having attended numerous youth ministry conferences, I am constantly frustrated at how often the underlying question seems to be, *how can we be relevant to youth?* This question assumes two things. Firstly, it assumes that the gospel is somehow *irrelevant* in our culture and that it must be applied and reformulated to appeal to youth. It does not seem to account for the mediatorship of Christ, nor does it seem to do justice to the Spirit speaking to us through Scripture. I am not suggesting we should remain indifferent to the needs and interests of youth, but to

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30 James Atkinson, *Martin Luther and the Birth of Protestantism* (Middlesex: Pelican, 1968), 129.

31 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 146.

32 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 291.

33 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 149.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*, 203.

start with a question of *relevance* is to place the youth themselves, not Christ, at the centre. Secondly, the question runs the danger of reducing the church to a set of functions: what can we *do* to be relevant? What *steps* can we take to welcome youth in to our church? It misunderstands the role of the church. It is a *community* centred around Christ. The question of relevance is a question concerned with pragmatics. It places everything on the perceived “success” or “failure” of a particular form of outreach.

By way of contrast, Bonhoeffer would have us make the beginning point of outreach into the wider community that of listening: listening to the will of Jesus as attested in Scripture, and acknowledged by faith in prayer and the worship of the church. Only by constantly looking on Christ can we understand what it means to be a community of the Beatitudes. Only by looking on Christ can we see the world through this lens and according to this new reality. And only through Christ can we live in this new reality and participate in its coming in fullness on earth.

THE MEDIATORSHIP OF CHRIST

We have talked a lot about looking *to* Christ and abiding *in* Christ. But what do these mean? How are we to participate in his ministry? How is he mediator? In discussing *Discipleship*, Ernst Feil helpfully observes that “nowhere else in Bonhoeffer’s work is Christ referred to as a mediator with such force.”³⁶ In dying to our old selves and rising to new life in Christ, Christ goes before us in every venture. He is the one who mediates for us: with God; with people; and with our very reality. This rebirth in the Spirit comes in the form of a call and response: a call which is ultimately costly, and a response which allows no other concurrent loyalties and allegiances. Christ’s call is direct and immediate, coming between the believer and all else.

So if Christ is the sole mediator – the very lens through which we experience and interact with God, others, and the world itself – and if his form is still present in the world, then, as Ernst Feil asserts, we arrive at a cancellation of immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*) with all other things: “there exists no other immediacy, no other directness of contact, except that with Christ.”³⁷ Christ the God-man, the form (*Gestalt*) of the reconciler, who was made incarnate, “steps into the middle between God and the world, into the centre of all that happens.”³⁸ In this moment, the whole of history is redefined. It is redefined by the name of Jesus – the one who is the Word of God acting within history.

36 Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 79.

37 Ibid.

38 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 83.

Christ mediates for us in a threefold sense: firstly, with God. Not even prayer grants us direct access to the Father. Even in this we pray in Jesus’ name, that he would take our prayers and make them worthy. He, the one without sin, hears our broken prayers and makes them acceptable. Secondly, he mediates between people. The disciples gathered around Christ and it was only by virtue of following Christ that they were brought together in community. It is in doing the will of God that we are made brothers and sisters of Christ (Mark 3:35). This community is more than just gathering *with* Christ, it is gathering *in* Christ. The body of Christ is church community (*Gemeinde*).³⁹ If we are raised to new life in Christ then it follows that the community existing in that new life exists in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. We are “bound together by faith, not by experience.”⁴⁰ Thirdly, Christ exists as mediator between people and the world. Christ steps into the centre of all that happens. When the disciple is called to follow, the disciple is called to leave everything. Christ constitutes the very reality by which the disciple lives. So much so that disciples never experience the reality of God apart from the reality of the world and *vice versa*.⁴¹ Even their existence in the world is solely as disciples of Christ for they live an existence totally foreign to the worldly life they owned before. As the one through whom and for whom all creation was created, Christ necessarily reconstitutes our very relationship with the world in which we live. In participating in his life we are called to take active interest in the sustenance and renewal of a fallen creation.

Briefly then, it is worth discussing how we concretely participate in this Christ-reality. What does it mean to continually *become* Christ’s presence in the world? Christ *is* present; his body *is* visible. As Christians we see the world and act in the world *through* him. And therefore, for Bonhoeffer, our state of becoming the body of Christ must be centred around Christ’s active presence in the Christian community. Firstly, then, the body is made visible through the *preaching of the word*. Our being is found in Christ who is Word made flesh (John 1:14). Bonhoeffer writes:

It is wrong to assume that on the one hand there is a word, or a truth, and on the other hand there is a community existing as two separate entities, and that it would then be the task of the preacher to take this word, to

39 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 217.

40 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, DBW 5, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1996), 47.

41 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 55.

manipulate and enliven it, in order to bring it within and apply it to the community.⁴²

Contrastingly, the Word is spoken through the work of the Spirit – the preacher is the mere servant of, what Bonhoeffer calls, the “movement inherent in the Word itself.”⁴³ The community is the living and breathing form of the Word in the world. The church is proof that the proclaimed word of “the kingdom come near” is true. So this is the first thing: the church is nothing if it is not forever listening and hearing the word of God spoken in Scripture, and lived out through response to that word in faith.

Secondly, the body is made visible through the sacraments. In baptism “we are made members of Christ’s body.”⁴⁴ In the Lord’s Supper “we receive the gift of bodily community with the body of the Lord”⁴⁵ and with each other. They are the concrete forms of the spoken word which build and sustain the community of Christ. It is in the sacraments that we hear of God’s actions in the world and receive visible and effective signs of his promises and of his past, present and future presence with us.

Finally, the body is made visible through the community itself. In hearing the word and in being formed and sustained by the sacraments, the community becomes the concrete presence of Christ in the world. While Bonhoeffer would not want to limit Christ’s presence to the church (a conviction which becomes more evident in his later writings), it should be affirmed that the church is of divine origin – not because of what it is in itself but because of what it is in Christ. The disciples were called to be a city on the hill because they were gathered around him who is the light of the world. Wherever people gather to hear Christ’s word and, in turn, to share in its proclamation, there the body of Christ is concretely visible in the world.

CONCLUSION: THE “LIGHT ON THE HILL” PARADOX

Trying to find a solution to the problem of a “declining” church in New Zealand is problematic. Firstly, it will most likely end in disappointment. Secondly, it assumes a solution can in fact be found – if only we thought a little wiser, and worked a little harder. Thirdly, it assumes trying to find a solution is the right thing to do! If, instead, we start with listening to Christ the Word, if we start with the reading of Scripture, if we start with our knees bowed in prayer and surrender, if we start with worship and praise of God who is here with us, and for us now, then the situation is not fraught

42 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 228.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

with anxiety but rather electrified and inspired by hope. Jesus Christ, *pro nobis*, is here today, working to make visible what is in fact already true: namely, the world has been reconciled to God in him; he calls us to join with him and to proclaim his good news in the world; he gives us a faith which is far stronger than earthly powers and principalities – a faith which finds its roots in the Truth.

If our visibility is not tied down and defined by numbers or mission initiatives, and if it is centred in the person of Christ, then we need not despair at the state of the church but rather rejoice at the new ways Christ is present in an ever-changing society and the ways the church can join in the Spirit’s work. Perhaps the shift away from traditional church buildings and the decline of nominal membership represents opportunities for new growth and freedom for the church to re-form itself in the form of Christ by the very power of his Spirit. The church may *look* different in the future, but the essential form will always remain the same – as the visible body of Christ.

But this does not mean we should *look* for ways to be more relevant or to apply secular models of success to our understanding of church. Yes, the external shape of the church may change, but as Bonhoeffer emphasizes, we are to be a *hidden* church. We are a church that looks to Christ and not to our own initiatives or successes. It is true that Bonhoeffer forged new initiatives and actively worked against the National Socialist regime, but it would be wrong to say he placed faith inherently in them. At all times, rightly or wrongly, Bonhoeffer sought to live out a faithful response to Christ’s call. Worship is therefore absolutely central to the church’s life. It is there we hear Christ’s word, are sustained at his table, and gather as a community. It is in worship that we become the very thing we profess to be in him. The “Light on the Hill” paradox is only reconcilable in Christ. We must be both extraordinary and hidden, visible and invisible, outspoken and silent, active and still, in the world and out of the world. We must die to ourselves, and rise to new life in Christ. Through the power of the Spirit, we must be attentive to Christ who is even now “making all things new” (Rev 21:5).

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THE VOICE: FROM TEXT TO LIFE WHEN GOD TALKS BEHIND YOUR BACK

GEOFF NEW

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." Then Satan answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord (Job 1:6–12 NRSV).¹

The story of Job raises as many questions as the afflictions he suffered. Yet one question often dominates: why? Why did God enter into such a conversation with Satan? Why did God give Job over to satanic designs and allow such devastation? Why did God allow the death of Job's children as the drama unfolded? Why did God never disclose to Job that he had been talking behind his back (Job 38–41)? Why are we, as readers, privileged with more information than Job and yet are still left wondering why? Why? Why? Why?

Within the sweep of the story of Job, the question "why?" blinds and deafens any who demand the answer to why evil exists and why the Lord seems to allow it. However, "why" is entirely the wrong question. Much of the rest of the book is taken up with Job's companions trying to plumb that question and, in the process, assassinating Job's character. I suppose most of us would do the same had we been there. Yet we weren't and we are not. Instead, unlike Job and his friends, we are privileged to be able to read the opening scenes and overhear the conversations between God and Satan (Job 1:6–12;

2:1–6). We are privy to a much deeper question, a question that gives a much better perspective by which to read the story.

On two occasions (Job 1:8; 2:3) God asks the question "Have you considered my servant Job?" In a word, the question by which to read this story and to walk in its light is "who?" Not "why?" The story asks us to consider the life of Job. Satan eradicates Job's wealth and family yet Job retains his integrity and does not sin or blame God (Job 1:22). Satan is given more room to manoeuvre and then breaks the man's health. Job still retains his integrity. His wife unwittingly takes up both God's and Satan's estimation of Job (Job 2:9): "Do you still persist with your integrity? (God's estimation of Job) Curse God, and die (Satan's estimation of Job)." By this point in the story Job's response has been one of mourning, worship, reverence, faithfulness, trust and praise (Job 1:20–21; 2:10). In answering the question "who?" Job's wife resorts to a "why" question; "why take this from God?" She essentially sides with Satan.

Recently a young adult in my church told me how to watch a movie. "Something is introduced at the beginning which will have significance at the end. Look for it." Applying that insight to Job gives even more prominence to the "who" question at the beginning. That question most certainly has significance at the end. After the arguments for the prosecution by Job's companions, and Job's defence (Job 4–37), God speaks again and the first word he utters is the question "who?" "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job 38:1). God's response (Job 38–41) is centred on revealing who he, God, is. He takes Job on a tour of the wonders of creation constantly asking who else can sustain, create, control and unleash the beauty and power of creation? Time and again God asks "who?" (38:5, 25, 36, 37, 41; 39:5; 41:11, 13, 14) and every time it is a rhetorical question. The answer is embarrassingly obvious. The "who" question begins the story and punctuates it at the end with a divine exclamation mark. In grappling with "who is Job?" we end up with an answer of an entirely different order; we are left with an answer to the question "who is God?" Not "why does God do this" or "not do that"; but who God is. God is sovereign

¹ This article is dedicated to Catherine van Dorp and Jason Goroncy (both of Knox Centre of Ministry and Leadership) for facilitating the presence of Christ at a time when I was asking "why?" They beautifully bore witness to Christ and opened my eyes to "who."

and answerable to no-one. “Have you considered my servant Job?” (Job 1–2) leads us to “Have you considered the God of Job?” (Job 38–41).

It seems that conversation described in Job 1–2 is not an isolated case. Rather God might actually be in the habit of talking about people behind their back. And for the purpose of advancing the question “who” rather than the question “why.” Maybe God asks us to consider his servants so that we are better able to consider the Master.

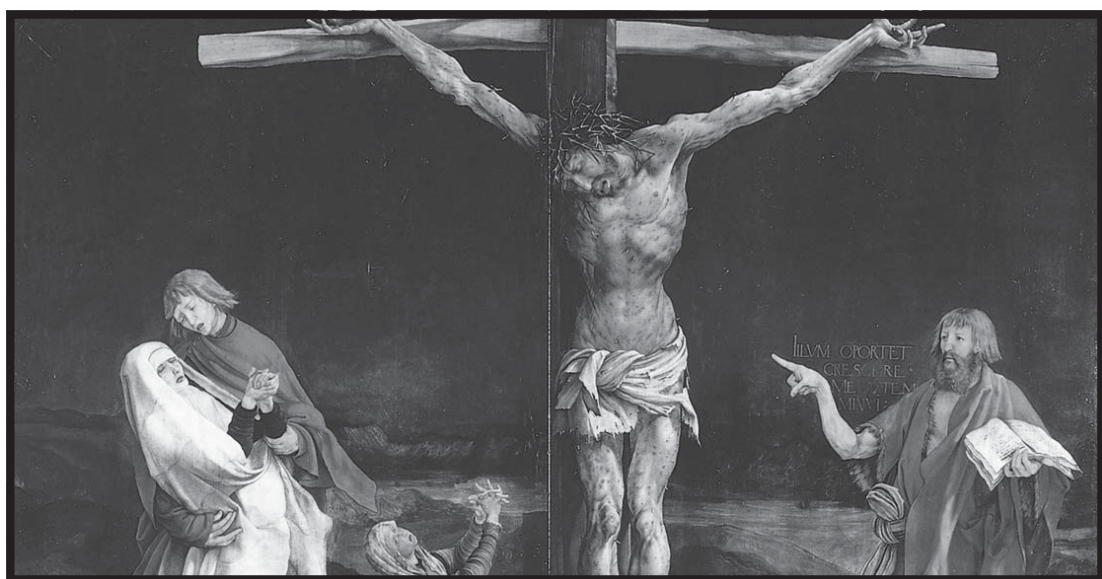
On the night Jesus was betrayed he revealed that a repeat of Job 1–2 was at play. “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). The “who” question was to the fore again. This time the question centred on Jesus’ disciples. This time the answer to “who” is seen in the nature of Christ’s intercession which reaches beyond the denial, betrayal, failure and suffering that night would bring, and promises restoration and resurrection (cf. Job 42 and John 21). In Job 2:6 the only restriction God imposed on Satan’s activity was “spare his life.” Now in the time of Christ the rules have changed. God who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all (Rom 8:32) and who defends any charge levelled against us (Rom 8:33) by virtue of his love expressed through Christ, reveals his work and nature through our weakness and brokenness (2 Cor 12:9). Christ who intercedes for us (Rom 8:34) is for us and not against us (Rom 8:31).

Recently I was speaking with a colleague. I had not seen him in nearly a year but I reminded him of something he had said to me the last time we had talked. The context of that conversation had

been a very dark time for me marked by severe difficulties. I said, “I think it was you who said this to me, and it really helped. You said, ‘you can’t change anyone else. You can only change yourself.’” He responded. “That doesn’t sound like something I would say. As a pastor you are not called to change people; you are called to bear witness.” He then described Grünwald’s Isenheim Altarpiece (1512–1516). The depiction of the suffering and crucified Christ is horrific and gruesome. His body is afflicted with sores and worms. Very Job-like. The original placement of this work was in the chapel of a monastery dedicated to the care of victims of a terrible plague-like sickness in the Middle-Ages. That is the kind of occasion which evokes an agonising “why?” At the foot of the cross stands John the Baptist (clearly anachronistically) with an open Bible pointing at Jesus. The Baptist’s words “He must increase but I must decrease” are quoted. He bears witness. From the midst of such injustice and sickness one is lifted up from the earth and we find ourselves asking “Who?” This was the lesson that I really needed to embrace; asking “who?” and bearing witness to him.

I wonder how often God talks about you behind your back. I wonder that as you consider the fallout in your life and faith and the rhythms embedded within if your witness raises the right question in your heart and minds: “who?”

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Mathias Grünwald, *The Crucifixion* (detail from the *Isenheim Altarpiece*), oil on panel, c. 1512–1516.