2010

Overhearing Resonances: Jesus and Ethics in King and Bonhoeffer

Gary M. Simpson
Luther Seminary, gsimpson@luthersem.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles

Part of the Christianity Commons, Ethics in Religion Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Simpson, Gary M., "Overhearing Resonances: Jesus and Ethics in King and Bonhoeffer" (2010). Faculty Publications. 276.
https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/276

Published Citation
King and Bonhoeffer were both influential preachers and thus accomplished orators. They were also both theologians whose theological writings were highly autobiographical. Our task is to consider how their understandings of Jesus influenced their ethics and moral leadership.

This is not a comparative study of Christologies that one might find in a traditional theological textbook, which often starts deductively with pre-conceived, abstract conceptions of humanity and divinity provided perhaps by Christian tradition(s) and philosophical analyses and then asks how two or more theologians comparatively understand the God-human relationship in Jesus. Rather, I will work more inductively with Bonhoeffer and King by examining some of the primary ways they each depict Jesus and how these images shape their social ethics. An inductive approach does not try to force either theologian into a procrustean bed of concern not their own but, rather, starts from concerns fitting to each of them. With King, for instance, at no time after entering full-time ministry did he ever sit down and compose a comprehensive and systematic account of the meaning and significance of Jesus. He just never perceived the Holy Spirit's calling to such a task. First, therefore, we will explore in King the significance of Jesus for social ethics from the perspective of oratory, following a clue offered by U.S. Representative John Lewis: "The voice held me right from the start." Second, we will explore the
relation between Jesus and social ethics for Bonhoeffer from the perspective of theological autobiography, because "he was one of those people who said what he did and did what he said, so that his life is a commentary on his writings, and his writings on his life." 3

Both King and Bonhoeffer thoroughly integrated Jesus with social ethics. Such thorough integration perennially frustrates the typical textbook approach, which tends to divide the understanding of Jesus and the interpretation of social ethics into different domains and then tries, awkwardly, to reunite them. I, however, will not rend asunder what the two of them have joined together. Again, from this more inductive approach I will listen for possible resonances between King and Bonhoeffer (and ourselves), though pitched in different keys, when overheard in close proximity to one another.

"Changing the Face of the Enemy": Jesus and the Ethics of Love

"Tell 'em about the dream, Martin; tell 'em the dream." Mahalia Jackson, the "Queen of Gospel Music" in the 1950s and 1960s, had become more and more fidgety as King went on talking on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on that August 28, 1963, Wednesday. She had just readied the hundreds of thousands of marchers with a rousing rendition of "I've Been 'Buked, and I've Been Scorned." 5 Now she fretted that the precious word of the Lord might be constrained, perhaps by an exaggerated concern for the larger nationwide white audience. King had come with a prepared text, but halfway through it he knew that it was not engaging his audience as hoped. It was King himself who had requested that his old friend Mahalia precede him, and as she sat just behind him on the podium, she could contain her soul no longer. She had heard King's set speech of "The Dream" at previous predominantly African American civil rights events. Now, in Washington, D.C., she willed the black spiritual idiom of faith, hope, and liberation to flow freely into the very speech that would come to embody the twentieth-century civil rights movement. 6

King did indeed speak forth the Dream, rooted in the American dream, but now he merged it with "Negro" idioms that gained for the American dream additional roots, more authentic depth, and thereby practical truth. 7

As an orator par excellence King always carefully and competently attended to his situated audience and then shaped his presentation of Jesus as love accordingly. So, with different audiences and situations he would bring out a different side of Jesus as love. As we will see, in certain situations Jesus' love shows forth as liberation; on other occasions with a different audience as
his hearers, Jesus’ love comes home to roost as healing balm. King himself does not seem much interested in or too worried about integrating or harmonizing these two presentations. Therefore, I will not look to impose some overarching synthesis. Instead, I will unearth the audience situations and King’s depictions accordingly, and finally note how King’s understanding of beloved community is the direct consequence of Jesus’ love as either liberation or healing balm. Above all, one must remember that for King “Christ is not only God-like, but God is Christ-like.” It is for this reason that King remained more christocentric than theocentric when it comes to Jesus’ love bringing about beloved community.

**Liberation**

“Love your enemies.” This exhortation by Jesus always unsettled King. “Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies.” By the end of the Montgomery bus boycott (1955-1956) he had also come to appreciate the teaching and witness of Mahatma Gandhi. From then on he promoted “the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence.” Numerous African Americans in the decade following World War II had come to Gandhian convictions prior to King, including some of King’s mentors like Benjamin Mays. Now, he, too, became convinced: “Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method.” Still, King understood Gandhi’s nonviolence as more than a method; it is “ultimately a way of life that men live by because of the sheer morality of its claim.”

After the spring of 1956 King always indivisibly and inseparably joined together the spirit and motivation of Jesus with the method of Gandhi, love with nonviolence, in an unbreakable union with the strength of conviction perhaps analogous to the classic Christian conviction of the union of Christ’s divinity and humanity. It is conceivable that without this joining of Jesus with Gandhi that King himself might over time have renounced his Christian faith, as he notes happened to other Christians. Still, the indivisibility and inseparability of Jesus and Gandhi never exhausted the significance of Jesus for King, especially when he oratorically faced an audience in dire need of Jesus as healing balm. For King, Gandhi’s nonviolent way of life becomes the mediating dynamic that links Jesus and liberation.

As a way of life love as nonviolent direct action liberates by changing the face of three enemies: the face of the oppressed, the face of the oppressor, and the face of the oppressive system. King condensed nonviolent direct action into six practices that change the face of the three enemies. The first two
practices liberate the enemy within oppressed peoples. First, nonviolent direct action is neither passive nor for cowards, but requires courage. Second, nonviolent direct action avoids not only doing external physical violence to the opponent but also shuns doing internal violence to the resister's spirit. Because "privileged groups rarely give up their privileges without strong resistance," nonviolent direct action must, therefore, be dynamically aggressive spiritually even though it is nonaggressive physically.\(^\text{13}\)

Oppressed peoples deal with their oppression in various ways, said King. For instance, they may rise up in hatred and violence. But when the oppressed practice hate, the "nobodiness" introduced by oppression gets doubled and further distorts the personality of the oppressed. Or they may acquiesce, resigning themselves to perpetual oppression. Ultimately this is immoral because "non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good."\(^\text{14}\) (We will return to this second possible response when we explore Jesus as balm.) Or oppressed people may respond by living in the courage of the more excellent way of nonviolent direct action. The love of nonviolent direct action creates "somebodiness" and gives concrete birth to "the new Negro."\(^\text{15}\)

The next two nonviolent practices change the oppressor, the face of the enemy without. With the third practice, nonviolent resisters willingly accept suffering for a cause, if necessary, but will never inflict suffering on others. Unearned suffering is redemptive. Love bears suffering and thereby is neither idealistic nor sentimental. King recalls Gandhi's insight:

Rivers of blood may have to flow before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood. . . . Things of fundamental importance to people are not secured by reason alone, but have to be purchased with their suffering. . . . Suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears which are otherwise shut to the voice of reason.\(^\text{16}\)

Unearned does not mean masochistic. Rather, when reasonable and persuasive speech fails, unearned suffering is the moral means of last resort to awaken the conscience of an oppressive adversary and of a wider passive public. "When a police dog buried his fangs in the ankle of a small child in Birmingham, he buried his fangs in the ankle of every American."\(^\text{17}\)

Fourth, nonviolent direct action seeks reconciliation, not defeat of an adversary. After all, said King, oppressors are also victims of their own oppressive behavior. Nonviolent resisters seek to win their adversary's understanding and even friendship rather than to humiliate or defeat them."The
end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.\textsuperscript{18}

The last two nonviolent practices \textit{change the face of the unjust system}. In the fifth practice, nonviolent direct action aims to remove evil forces, not to destroy persons who perpetrate evil deeds. Sixth, nonviolent direct action is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice. The true conflict is between justice and injustice. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," King regularly intoned.\textsuperscript{19} When the justice of nonviolent direct action rolls down like waters and the righteousness of loving the enemy pours forth like an ever-flowing stream, then the face of the third enemy is changed. In these moral practices liberation comes, freedom rings, and love reigns supreme.

Most who came to the now iconic 1963 March on Washington had expected to hear a King who was all about integration, and not simply desegregation. No one was disappointed. However, the common assumption of white American integrationists—20 percent of the marchers that day were white—was that integration meant the fuller inclusion of African Americans into American civic life, that is, into a white-defined America. That, too, was the unexamined assumption of the white liberal Christian social gospel movement, which King had studied as a Ph.D. student at Boston University. While King did indeed imagine full inclusion of African Americans in American civic life, note well how he ended the speech!

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants—will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last."\textsuperscript{20}

Here King proclaims the day when all Americans will join hands, sing together, and be integrated into nothing less than an old Negro spiritual. There's the surprise. Not only are African Americans integrated within American civic life, dominated as it had been by an amalgam of European ethnicities; but white Americans—yes, all Americans—get integrated also into the spiritual force field of African American community. Only when integrated in such a way are all citizens and residents mutually free at last. Only when American civic life is thus rebooted is America as a body politic, not merely its citizens and residents, but America itself concretely liberated. Here we can see
how thoroughly entwined is King's liberation Christology with his oratorical wealth and beauty.

The profoundly moral key of King's depiction of Jesus as liberation has much in common with the social gospel of white liberal Protestantism, but he also infused the social gospel with four new elements. First, following Howard Thurman, the legendary African American theologian from earlier in the twentieth century, King made racial injustice for the disinherited, for the "'bucked and scorned," a more abiding focus of social gospel concern. Second, borrowing from Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism, he added a larger dose of realism about the stubbornness of human sin than liberal Protestantism had; this realism ended the fantasy that privileged groups would willingly and smoothly give up their privileges. Third, as we have seen, true integration is a two-way street; in fact, integration as liberation is more like a traffic circle with mutual integration crossing over a variety of previously segregated worlds. Finally, he added a larger dose of practical activism for the racially oppressed by thoroughly binding Jesus as liberation to the realism of nonviolent direct action.

_Balm_

Still, King's depiction of Jesus always had another side, the redemptive tenderheartedness of healing.21 In this way especially did the black Christian folk preacher traditions profoundly shape the significance of Jesus for King. Here, he found the personal God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth compelling, satisfying, healing, and encouraging. So did—and does—the black church. When he had the larger national audience of predominantly white America in his oratorical purview, he practiced a restraint about his own inner spiritual struggles. But he frequently abandoned that restraint when in the presence of the black church, "the safest place on earth."22 There he shared his own discouragement, communing thereby out of the depths with his black Christian brothers and sisters. On such occasions he stood in the company of the "'bucked and the scorned."

Here especially the black Jesus steps boldly forth in King's preaching, often in the words of an old Negro spiritual like "Never Alone." Here Jesus himself personally promises his indomitable solidarity with Martin who, it seemed, had merged himself almost indistinguishably with the congregation.

And I say it to you out of experience this morning, yes, I've seen the lightning flash. (Yes, sir) I've heard the thunder roll. (Yes) I've felt sin-breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus, saying
still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, (Yes, sir) never to leave me alone. (Thank you, Jesus) No, never alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me. Never to leave me alone. (Glory to God)

In black congregations King often recalled how an elderly woman from Montgomery, affectionately called Sister Pollard, had “preached” to him. This was the same woman who during the bus boycott had once been mockingly asked by a bus driver if she wasn’t exhausted and wouldn’t she like to end her boycott and ride the bus. “Yes,” she answered politely, “my feets is tired, but my soul is rested.” At one point in that boycott King himself had become quite discouraged, fearing that the struggle had been lost. “You didn’t talk strong enough tonight,” exhorted Sister Pollard. “Now come close to me,” she continued, “and let me tell you something one more time, and I want you to hear it this time. Now I done told you we is with you. Now, even if we ain’t with you, the Lord is with you. The Lord’s going to take care of you.”

In the company of the “'buked and scorned,” he regularly brought Jesus the Great Physician into their midst through the Negro spiritual idiom of “There Is a Balm in Gilead.” He reminded black believers what he had learned from Thurman. In the biblical book of Jeremiah, the great prophet himself had only posed the question, “Is there a balm in Gilead?” “Centuries later our slave foreparents came along (Yes, sir) . . . and they took Jeremiah’s question mark and straightened it into an exclamation point.” With that exclamation point the black generations are bound together in one democracy of the dead together with the living. With that exclamation point the healing balm of Jesus dare never be reduced to an otherworldly sop. That exclamation point removes complacency and empowers for this-worldly liberating action. Eternal healing capacitates earthly agency. Balm enables liberation in “the fierce urgency of now” and brings the beloved community into being.

Beloved Community

King used the notion of beloved community where Jesus in the New Testament had intoned the notion of the coming kingdom of God. “The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. . . .” Here we see that just as nonviolence is the mediating reality between Jesus’ love and liberation so also it is the mediating reality between Jesus and beloved community. Likewise, personal redemptive healing never leaves one alone as a self-subsisting individual. Jesus as balm just as surely means community—Sister Pollard’s “we is with you.” Commenting on the christological source and nature of beloved community King concludes:
Finally, . . . [i]t is this deep faith in the future that causes the nonviolent resister to accept suffering without retaliation. He knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship. This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith. There is something at the very center of our faith which reminds us that Good Friday may reign for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the Easter drums.28

Because beloved community is the outcome of both Jesus' love as liberation and Jesus' love as balm, there is a sense in which beloved community joins together the two oratorical sides of King's presentation of Jesus, the liberation side of the social gospel and the healing side of black folk Christianity, though King himself never says this in so many words.

The nonviolent communication that King used in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” offers a classic instance of enacting already now the coming and hoped-for beloved community. Eight prominent white liberal clergy had written an editorial in the Birmingham News calling the civil rights campaign in Birmingham both “unwise and untimely.” King countered the accusation of untimely with his argument for “the fierce urgency of now,” as he would put it in “I Have a Dream” and “A Time to Break Silence.” But how would he address the charge of being “unwise,” which channeled the oft-heard southern white complaint that civil rights advocates are merely outside agitators and troublemakers?

King, at the time officially a minister in Atlanta, had come to Birmingham because he was president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which operated in every southern state. Furthermore, the local SCLC affiliate had asked him as national president to come. He did not, however, rebut the charge only with such organizational truths. Other, weightier reasons had impelled him, spanning an arc commencing with God's own call and stretching across the entire universe. “But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here . . . Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid,” alluding to Acts 16. The arc ends in a famous oratorical flurry of cosmic sociality.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.29

As an eighteen-year-old, I—the son of a Kentucky “hillbilly” and the grandson of a Klansman—personally experienced this inescapable network of
mutuality when I read “Letter from Birmingham Jail” for the first time. The oratorical beauty of his argument against the accusation of “untimely” first caught me up short and then enraptured me, quite literally, in beloved community. I dwelt, seemingly forever, on the following lengthy paragraph, cited here in an austerely abridged form:

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; . . . when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.30

Here King accomplishes a moment of empathetic insight in his opponents, a moment that social psychologists call “social perspective taking.” First, he takes the initial step by imaginatively crossing over into the social reality and perspective of his liberal white critics. “I guess it is easy . . . to say, ‘Wait.’” Second, through ten brief, carefully constructed vignettes placed side by side—teachers of oratory call this “parataxis”—he gives verse to the testimony of what every African American had continually experienced on a daily basis, “But when you have seen . . .” Read the entire paragraph, oppressive vignette following oppressive vignette. Could any white person with even a flicker of conscience hear this cumulative testimony of weary years and silent tears and remain unmoved, indifferent, and unrepentant? The beauty and miracle of nonviolent oratory arrives in the last clause when the “you” of African American testimony edges under the skin of white Americans, placing them under the influence of Negro realities. “Then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.” Through nonviolent communication the inescapable network of mutuality initiates beloved community itself. The timeliness of the Birmingham campaign ultimately rests on the universal wisdom and beauty of beloved community, which King found trustworthy because he believed it flowed from Jesus’ love as liberation and balm.

Still, mutual understanding, like authentic oratory, must be embodied. Beloved community only exists as incarnated. As one civil rights activist testified, “The only thing we had was our bodies. They [our movement leaders] were welcome to our bodies, and they could use our bodies the best way they saw fit. And so this was the thing. We put our bodies on the line.”31

The Birmingham campaign was dying on the vine within its first couple of weeks. King’s own imprisonment had done little. Not until over two thousand African American youth, organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and without their parents’ permission, put their bodies on the
line marching two by two, fifty at a time, did the campaign turn redemptive. Day by day newspapers, magazines, and TV broadcasts displayed their young bodies being pummeled by fire hoses, ripped by police dogs, and hauled away in paddy wagons. Those in the white American public who paid attention and cared were brought to their knees.

As long as injustice persists, King's vision of beloved community remains incarnated in the practice of nonviolent direct action and rooted in the healing balm of Sister Pollard's exclamation, "The Lord is with you." A fuller exploration of the implications of beloved community for King's social ethics would pay attention to the moral import within the matrix of nonviolent direct action, civil society organizations, alliance politics, and the interconnections of racism, classism, and militarism. The momentum gained in Birmingham through this moral matrix made possible the 1963 March on Washington, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and eventually the 2009 inauguration of President Barack Hussein Obama. Where will we "put our bodies on the line" today? Ultimately, for King such a question was a matter of his Christian faith in Jesus, who loved his enemies.

"View from Below": Jesus Christ Himself—The Bearing God Who Shares Our Place

Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived his adult years during the period leading up to and then including Hitler's Nazi reign of wickedness. He therefore wrote theological ethics for "times that are out of joint" but also with a hopeful eye toward "the quiet flow of calmer times." "Today," noted Bonhoeffer, "we have villains and saints again, in full public view.... The contours are sharply drawn. Reality is laid bare. Shakespeare's characters are among us. The villain and the saint have little or nothing to do with ethical programs." Here I will explore Bonhoeffer's combination of theology and autobiography through three themes that weave together his Christology, ecclesiology, and social ethics: place-sharing, the communion of saints, and the view from below.

"Who Christ really is, for us today" was for years "bothering" Bonhoeffer, though he did not pen that now-famous question until April 30, 1944, while incarcerated in Tegel Prison. Ten weeks later and just four days before the famous failed attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944, Bonhoeffer presciently confessed, "only the suffering God can help." By saying "only" he was consciously rejecting the belief that was dominant among the Nazi Christians who had reduced Christian faith to a god revealed preeminently as divine omnipotence and power as control. Ironically, this false god of omnipotence
and control led other Germans to abandon Christianity altogether for various forms of deism, pantheism, or atheism. By the 1940s Bonhoeffer was thoroughly confident that only through the theology and proclamation of the cross of Christ would Germany receive the real help that God promises for the world.

Let us pick up Bonhoeffer’s journey to a cruciform “God who bears” in the year 1932. At the age of twenty-six he faced a personal spiritual crisis. The overall nature of this crisis can be reconstructed though the details remain shrouded. In a now well-known letter from Tegel Prison on April 22, 1944, to his former student and now best friend Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer recalled a change that was both heartrending and momentous, of which he had not spoken openly before. Prior to 1932 he had exercised an “ambition that many noticed in me [which] made my life difficult.” He related to people “in a very unchristian way,” and used his considerable intellectual capabilities in a manner that “turned the doctrine of Jesus Christ into something of personal advantage for myself.... I was quite pleased with myself... but I had not yet become a Christian.” In sum, among his friends and family he exercised a powerful, controlling, and “dominating ego” that belied his Christian faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer began working on his most widely read book, *Discipleship*, during this time of personal crisis, though the book was not published until 1937. While he wrote it explicitly for the church, he also oriented it theologically to resolve his own personal crisis. How so? In *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer disciplines his own dominating ego by acknowledging the presence of a more authoritative ego who commands submission in obedience. Jesus is that commanding presence; and the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount is the omnipotent God.

On July 21, 1944, the day after the failed assassination of Hitler, Bonhoeffer admitted to “dangers” in his book, *Discipleship*, though overall he also stood by what he had written. At the heart of the danger is the notion that by submitting obediently to the commanding Christ Bonhoeffer “could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it.” But buried just beneath *Discipleship*’s dominant themes of command and obedience is a hidden treasure found in a subordinate christological motif.

**Place-Sharing**

In *Discipleship*’s subordinate motif we meet a different Jesus, a crucified Christ, “the suffering God.” Bonhoeffer’s rich metaphor is God as bearer: “God is a God who bears. ... The Son of God bore our flesh. He therefore bore the
cross. He bore all our sins and attained reconciliation by his bearing.” There is a sociality in Jesus Christ characterized by bearing the realities and burdens of others. Bearing is the defining feature within Jesus’ life, which is circumscribed by his incarnation, ministry of forgiveness and healing, cross, resurrection, and ascension. “That kind of Lord,” rather than the varieties of lordship rooted in power as control or command, is the real Jesus for us today.  

Bonhoeffer had been exploring the sociality of Christ since his two dissertations written in 1927 and 1930 respectively. “God binds God’s self to human beings.” In Christ God’s true freedom is to be free for, not from, the world. Bonhoeffer used a technical German term to summarize this free sociality of Christ for and with the world: Stellvertretung, which is translated “vicarious representative action” or, more usably, “place-sharing.” Because of Jesus’ place-sharing sociality, Bonhoeffer entreated his university students to discover “where” Jesus is whenever they were inquiring “who” Jesus is. With whom is Jesus sharing a place? Despite significant differences from King’s Christology, one might still overhear profound resonances echoing between Bonhoeffer’s place-sharing sociality of Jesus himself and the personal solidarity that King trusted when Jesus comes as balm in unyielding solidarity with the “buked and scorned.” That resonance reverberates even more vigorously as Bonhoeffer knits together his Christology with his ecclesiology.

The Communion of Saints: Where Christ Takes Bodily Form

Already in the 1927 dissertation, Sanctorum Communio, the twenty-one-year-old Bonhoeffer took a cue from Martin Luther and developed his place-sharing sociality of Christ as the very heart and soul of the Christian church. The church is Christ’s bodily bearing of sufferers and sinners. Bonhoeffer then took Luther’s place-sharing understanding of the church and connected it also to ethics as formation. “‘Formation’ means therefore in the first place Jesus Christ taking form in Christ’s church . . . the body of Christ. . . . The church is nothing but that piece of humanity where Christ really has taken form.” In this way Jesus’ place-sharing is the form of the church both internally among Christians as they face the perils and burdens that come with this-worldly existence and externally as the church relates to the wider world.

Bonhoeffer astutely interpreted Luther’s point that Christ is “for you” precisely by being deeply “with you.” Christ, therefore, takes form in the church’s being “for-one-another” precisely through the church’s being “with-one-another.” It is almost as if Bonhoeffer had overheard Sister Pollard nearly thirty years into the future whispering to King, “we is with you . . . the Lord is with you.” Christ always exists as concrete churchly sociality
and communion in solidarity with the world in its suffering and sin, in its joys and hopes.

**View from Below: Ethics in the Midst of the Church and World**

Bonhoeffer's conviction that Christ exists today as real churchly communion and solidarity came home to him through his pastoral ministry in two very different congregational settings. Immediately after completing his dissertation in 1927, he became a pastoral intern for a year in a German-speaking church in Barcelona, Spain. There, he witnessed the social and economic extremes of the well-off, on the one hand, and of the large numbers of poor, unemployed, and homeless people, on the other. He came to know people "the way they are, far from the masquerade of the 'Christian world'... small people with small goals, small drives, and small crimes—all in all... real people."40

In 1929-30 he spent a little over a year back in Berlin as an assistant university lecturer and wrote his second dissertation (a German requirement) before going off as a postdoctoral fellow to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. There he quickly became friends with an African American student named Frank Fisher. Fisher took him to the prominent African American church in Harlem, Abyssinian Baptist, where Bonhoeffer then attended nearly every Sunday, taught Sunday school, and led a women's Bible study. As Bonhoeffer noted in 1942, his year in New York was "of the greatest significance for me up to the present day," and his experience of Abyssinian Baptist and its people was "one of the most important and gratifying events of my stay in America." He heard "the 'black Christ'... preached with captivating passion and vividness... [and] the Negro spirituals... [with their] strange mixture of reserved melancholy and eruptive joy... in the face of their incomparably harsh fate..."41 Can you imagine the learning curve in this budding German intellectual?

Just a few short years after those congregational entrées into churchly place-sharing and communion Bonhoeffer would help initiate both the Pastors' Emergency League and the Confessing Church, both formed to resist the Nazification of the Protestant church. Resistance was at times effective but more often it was not. Time and again, Bonhoeffer was disappointed but at no time more so than on the night of November 9, 1938. This was Kristallnacht, "the night of broken glass," that infamous, violent pogrom against Jews perpetrated throughout Germany, when nearly one hundred Jews were murdered and twenty-five to thirty thousand were taken to concentration camps, when two hundred synagogues were burned to the ground and thousands of Jewish businesses and homes were vandalized and torched. On Kristallnacht the
Confessing Church was silent! There was no place-sharing, no solidarity. What Bonhoeffer had said just a few years earlier applied now, "Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants."  

Bonhoeffer's place-sharing Christology begins early in his career and continues all the way through to his imprisonment theology of the suffering God and of Christ as "the man for others." A few months before his imprisonment he wrote a Christmas letter to his close-knit family, friends, and fellow assassination conspirators. It includes reflections entitled "The View from Below," which sums up well the tightly woven fabric of Bonhoeffer's Christology, ecclesiology, and ethics: "There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer." 

**Conclusion: Christian Life as Surprise**

Jesus always desires to take his churchly body somewhere in closeproximity, indeed, in deep solidarity with sufferers and sinners. This will always, no doubt, surprise his churchly body along the way, and perhaps the world as well, because no sector or segment of contemporary life, whether private or public or some combination, can be in principle off-limits for Christian communion, ethical engagement, and moral leadership. King and Bonhoeffer compose the significance of Jesus for social ethics using different keys, as we have seen. Yet the Jesus they heard and followed took them to places that neither had expected. Because their theologies still resonate today in diverse ears, I expect Jesus might again surprise those who hear and follow him.