God is a God Who Bears: Intensifying Schroeder's Critique of Barth by way of Bonhoeffer's Confession of Christ

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"God Is a God Who Bears":
Intensifying Schroeder’s Critique of Barth by Way of
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by
Gary M. Simpson

Early on, Edward H. Schroeder sharply criticized Karl Barth. The same can be said of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer, as everyone knows, was deeply indebted to Barth. The same, however, cannot be said of Ed Schroeder. Ed’s critique cuts into the Barthian project by means of the Reformation’s law-and-promise hermeneutic—Ed’s proverbial “the Augsburg Aha!” Dietrich’s critique cuts into the Barthian project by means of Christology—a Christology implicit within “the Augsburg Aha,” especially in Confessio Augustana, Articles III and IV, on Christology and justification respectively.

That Ed Schroeder’s seventy-fifth birthday coincides with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s forthcoming one hundredth birthday in 2006 offers a twofold opportunity. First, we can challenge the current “Bonhoeffer revival” by way of Dietrich’s characteristically Lutheran inquiry, “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?”1 Second, we can engage Ed’s critique of Barth in order to unfold Ed’s lifelong confession of Christ, which never wastes another characteristically Lutheran inquiry, “Why Jesus?” Not only can we intensify Bonhoeffer’s confession of Christ by not wasting Schroeder’s “Why Jesus?” but we can also intensify Schroeder’s critique of Barth by way of Bonhoeffer. My goal is to intensify, indeed, to execute our confession of Jesus Christ for us today. In my case the indigenous “our” and “us” names the thinning number of Westernized Christians who, nevertheless, are increasingly expanding in global dominance. To respond to these opportunities and challenges, I will 1) engage Ed’s critique of Barth and how that critique invigorates Ed’s own confession of Christ; 2) elucidate Bonhoeffer’s critique of Barth’s doctrine of Lordship; 3) expound Bonhoeffer’s consequent Christ confession that “God is a God who bears;” and 4) explore how Bonhoeffer’s confession can intensify and expand Ed’s, or better, our confession of Christ in a new era of mission by exposing, indeed, by executing the missional-ecclesial ethos of the God who bears.

I. Schroeder’s Critique of Barth and Consequent Confession of Christ

Already in his doctoral dissertation Schroeder criticized Karl Barth’s theological project.2 Schroeder begins by investigating the formal relationship between dogmatics and ethics. But substantive issues soon emerge because substance influences, even determines, the formal. The formal relationship between dogmatics and ethics in Barth depends on his “Christology as the hub,” which itself is “already conditioned by several [of Barth’s] theological opinions” (759). Schroeder lists three related arenas: the human predicament, the qualitative difference between God and humanity, and the concept of faith.


2 A condensation of Schroeder’s dissertation appeared as “The Relationship between Dogmatics and Ethics in the Thought of Elert, Barth, and Troeltsch,” Concordia Theological Monthly XXXVI (December 1965):744-771. All page numbers in this and the next five paragraphs refer to this article.
According to Schroeder, Barth focuses humanity’s theological problem in humanity’s “lack of knowledge of God.” Sin is ignorance. Sin is epistemological privation. Theology as a whole, both dogmatics and ethics, is therefore “an epistemological” matter of adding what’s missing.  

Schroeder summarizes Barth:

Man needs God’s revelation, Jesus Christ, as the answer and solution to this personal theological problem. The revelation that does come in Jesus Christ is primarily a communication of the predestinarian verdict of God, concerning which man is ignorant. Jesus does not and does not have to achieve or execute man’s redemption. Rather He reveals to man the news that God and God alone has done all this, and has done so in His eternal decree of predestination before the world began. (759)

In Schroeder’s telling, Barth’s second, substantive theological opinion runs like this. A qualitative difference, a gap exists between God and humanity, the Creator and creature. No human action, nothing creaturely, can qualify as divine. As Barth likes to say, God and divine things are “totaliter aliter,” totally other. At most, earthly things, human and otherwise, can be signs and pointers, representations and imitations, parables and analogies of heavenly things. Language too can also carry only a “pointer” character.

According to Schroeder, Barth’s concept of faith flows naturally from his first two theological convictions.

Faith is essentially knowledge, man’s knowledge of the divine reality, the “grace-full God,” on the other side of the divine-human gap. . . . The main theological terms related to faith—baptism, justification, sanctification, sin, repentance, preaching—undergo under Barth’s hand the basic transformation indicated by the formula credo=intelligo. (760)

Barth can thereby summarize and indeed unify all dogmatic and ethical problems and tasks under “Soli deo Gloria!” (757). For Barth, God’s glory means, as Schroeder notes, God’s sovereignty. “For Barth the original “sovereign act” is predestination in God’s eternal (i.e., pretemporal) decree” (762). Jesus’ centrality is thereby “more in an illustrative than a causative way” (762). He is “exposition, not execution” (763). Christian life is likewise “demonstratio,” lived “demonstrationally,” to quote Barth (763). As Barth sees it Christian ethics serves that demonstration. Though Schroeder doesn’t say it here, the third use of the law won’t be far behind.

Schroeder hones his critique further. Above everything else Barth is determined “to let God be God and to keep the creature being the creature” (771). Barth thereby “centered” his

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3 In 1983 Schroeder cites Heinrich Boehmer’s point in Road to Reformation that the Reformation proposed a more contrarian doctrine of sin to the dominant Roman doctrine of sin as privation (see Edward H. Schroeder, “Baptism and Confession,” (typescript manuscript, dated November 1, 1983, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, OH), p. 9.

4 Schroeder cites Regin Prenter (“Die Einheit von Schoepfung und Erloesung. Zur Schoepfungslehre Karl Barths,” Theologische Zeitschrift, II (May/June 1946)) to collaborate his own critique of Barth’s epistemological reductionism and revelationist Christology.
Christology “in the incarnation, where one body bridged the gap between the two sides of the abyss” (762). He even “subordinate[d] Good Friday and Easter in the process. In this way Barth designs all theological reflection to protect God’s utter sovereignty, which is the real reason for his “predestinarian protology” (771). In the end, argues Schroeder, Barth promotes “a spiritualized First Article [of the Creed]” and a “depreciation of history” (771).

From this early critique of Barth we now turn to Schroeder’s own confession of Christ. Much of Ed’s teaching and writing over the last half of his career has been in dialogue with third world theologians of the cross and with missiologists. For years he taught a course called “Third World Theologies of the Cross.” Ed’s Christ confession surfaces blatantly in “Lessons for Westerners from Setiloane’s Christology” (1985). Gabriel Setiloane, a Botswanan Methodist theologian and poet, wrote his poem, “I Am an African” as a critical dialogue with a nameless, paradigmatic Western Christian missionary inquisitor. By overhearing this inquisition, Ed helps other hearing-impaired Westernized Christians to hear Setiloane’s preached Christ as good news for them, for us!

“Why Jesus?” That simple, incessant child-like question morphs immediately into Ed’s “Why is Jesus necessary?” (8) And we’re off and running into the kind of critical inquiry that conversations with Ed are famous for. It doesn’t take him long. While in the first paragraph Ed innocuously highlights Jesus as something “new” and “good,” in fact, “very good,” in the second paragraph he is aggressively diagnosing “western Christians.” More pointedly, he’s probing pastors and theology students—Westernized ones. I myself have been both this student and this pastor; and I can tell you by experience “Schroeder” won’t let us off the hook without an account.

For Ed, the word “Westerners” or, more specifically, “western Christians,” is a technical term. He admits that “western” is “a complex composition” (8). In “Lessons-from-Setiloane” he doesn’t get very precise so we’ll have to decipher a couple of hints. He identifies “two chronic deficits in western Christians.” “The first is a ‘revelationist Jesus’” (8). It is evident here that he hasn’t traveled very far from his 1963 dissertation. What was true regarding Barth is now chronically true of westerners in general. Now, this could be the case primarily because Karl Barth has been the great influence in twentieth-century Western Protestant theology. Or, it could be the case because Barth was merely articulating a more general Western theological pattern. Both are likely true, though the latter is truer, I would argue.

We can detect an echo from Martin Luther in Schroeder’s critique of “a revelationist Jesus.” Big surprise, huh! Here’s Ed’s fuller description of this Western deficit.

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[A] "revelationist Jesus" . . . presents Jesus as divine revealer, to be sure, but one who is
not qualitatively different from other revealers—Moses, Isaiah, or John the Baptist. He
[Jesus] is different quantitatively. He does supremely and perfectly what other revealers
do less successfully. Had the predecessors done their job (of communicating) and had
their audiences done their job (of comprehending), Jesus would not really have been
necessary. (8)

Now, in a text Ed routinely quotes, listen to Luther reminiscing toward the end of his life about
how he came to his evangelical breakthrough.

For a long time I went astray and didn’t know what I was doing. To be sure, I
was onto something, but I did not know what it really was until I came to the text in Rom.
1:17, "The one who through faith is righteous shall live." That text helped me. There I
saw what righteousness Paul was talking about. The word stuck out in the text. I
connected the abstract notion of righteousness with the concrete phenomenon of being
righteous, and finally understood what I had here. I learned to distinguish between the
law's kind of righteousness and that of the gospel. My previous reading was marred by
but one defect in that I made no distinction between the law and the gospel. I regarded
them to be identical and spoke as though there was no difference between Christ and
Moses other than their location in time and their relative perfection. But when I found
that distinction—that the law is one thing, and the gospel is something else—that was my
breakthrough. 6

Ed’s "different quantitatively" echoes Martin’s "no difference . . . other than . . . relative
perfection."

Schroeder’s nose for a Jesus who is "qualitatively different" retrieves Luther’s "the
gospel is something else” than Moses or law, which in fact does reveal divine things. The law-gospel
hermeneutic, which the Augsburg Confession locates in the article on justification,
connects seamlessly with who Jesus is, with Christology. 7 Setiloane, argues Ed, especially has a
nose for a Jesus who is qualitatively different from Moses and thus also qualitatively different
from a "revelationist Jesus," from the chronically Westernized Jesus.

Setiloane’s own nose for qualitative difference comes because he is brutally honest with
the deficit of his African ancestors’ "God of old," no matter what names the ancestors may have
used (14). Here Setiloane is working the “Why Jesus?” turf, the “Why is Jesus necessary?”
critical inquiry with his own beloved kin. 8 The “God of old” is a problem for the ancestors, a

6 Martin Luther, Table Talk, winter 1542-43 (LW 54, 442).

7 Luther’s oft-made argument concerning the crucial place that justification by faith alone occupies within
all theology comes to mind. "If the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost." See
Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians (1531/35) LW 26, 9. Note how Luther seamlessly connects justification by
faith alone with the identity of Jesus in Smalcald Articles, Part II (see The Book of Concord, eds., Robert Kolb and
Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 301.

8 Schroeder also admits such honesty. One fruitful place is: Edward H. Schroeder, “Encountering the
theological problem, a big fat "God problem." The "God of old" "shone with a brightness so bright it blinded them," says Setiloane (14). The ancestors were sun-stroked; they died under the brightness, "in the heat of the sun." Divine revelation of this sort is finally deadly.

Some other revelation would be necessary; some One qualitatively different would be necessary; some One "new" and "good" must come, some One different than the "pale" Jesus that "The White Man brought." Setiloane continues:

And yet for us [Africans] it is when He is on the cross, This Jesus of Nazareth, with holed hands and open side, like a beast at a sacrifice: When He is stripped naked like us, Browned and sweating water and blood in the heat of the sun, Yet silent, That we cannot resist Him. (15)

Setiloane continues his confession. Here, when on the cross, this Jesus, "born in Bethlehem: Son of Man and Son of God," is "for all men, for all time" (15). Especially as Jesus hangs on the cross is Jesus new and good, is Jesus qualitatively different, is Jesus necessary.

Setiloane’s crucified Jesus is necessary in particular and with poignancy for his Western inquisitors with their “self-assumed superior tone” (13) rooted in their “own Western selves” (8). That's Schroeder’s sharp point, which Setiloane gently implies for those who have ears. Ed himself has ears for this criticism. Further, he rightfully and ruefully brings us Western selves within earshot, despite our presumptive “posture” of always and only being the “questioners.”

Setiloane’s inquisitor epitomizes Westerners in general, Christian or not. Western Christians need Setiloane’s crucified Jesus for two reasons, argues Schroeder. First, only Setiloane’s crucified Jesus can “perforate our Western cultural curtains” (13). We have draped these curtains not only over “Western civilization” but also over Jesus himself. We have thereby rendered Jesus “pale” and us Westerners “superior, if not even supercilious” (9). Schroeder does not draw back from hanging these Western cultural curtains on “the Old Adam/Old Eve still plaguing Christians” (8). In this way Setiloane preaches a critical theology of the cross.

Second, we Western Christians need Setiloane’s crucified Jesus because this crucified Jesus has something new to give, something good to share. Taking a cue from Setiloane, Schroeder calls this something, “the brand new posture” (12). Setiloane calls it “the same Sonship” as Jesus (15). About this something Luther claims, following widespread biblical precedent, “all that Jesus has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours.”

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9 I’m reminded of another of Ed’s dissertation subjects, Werner Elert, also Ed’s most influential teacher. On “the questioning posture” see Werner Elert, The Christian Faith: An Outline of Lutheran Dogmatics, trans. Martin H. Bertram & Walter R. Bouman (Reprint), pp. 30-41

10 Martin Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” LW 31, 298.
Setiloane preaches a generative theology of the cross. Schroeder finds such generative preaching “promissory” (10).

Pursuing this generative theology of the cross will help us Westerners hear Ed’s own confession of Christ precisely as a Western Christian. Echoing Luther’s Catechisms, Ed routinely treats this question under the rubric of “redemption.” I remember sitting in Lutheran Confessions’ class in 1976 and Ed lecturing on Luther’s exposition of the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed in the Catechisms. Here’s Luther:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature; purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own, and live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.11

Here are my lecture notes from class: “is my Lord” does not mean “is my boss.” Rather, “my Lord” means “my redeemer.” And to redeem means to “buy back.” “That I may be His own;” look, it’s about ownership; to take back ownership from the false owners, sin, death, and the Devil. Ed was quite adamant, as he can surely be, that Jesus’ Lordship is not about Jesus as “boss.” And this was some years before the popular bumper sticker inspired by American Evangelicalism, “My Boss is a Jewish Carpenter.” Jesus as Boss would put him back in the same camp, on the same turf, with Moses, only more perfect, quantitatively yet not qualitatively different from Moses.

Eighteen years after I heard that lecture Ed was saying the same thing as he sought to distinguish and, thus, properly relate the “care” and “redemption,” which in a familiar Offertory Prayer is our Christian calling and mission. “Redemption is the biblical word for rectifying the ownership issue in creation.”12 Redemption is “God’s ‘merciful takeover’ of the creation possessed by renegade and alien owners,” “God’s mercy management.” God’s “care,” quite distinguishable even qualitatively different from “redemption,” operates according to the “principle . . . rubrics . . . and structures of reciprocity.” God’s care for creation keeps ego-centric, sinful, predatory human creatures from going hog-wild, so to speak, but such care-giving “doesn’t cure ego-centrism, doesn’t redeem creation.”13

11 Martin Luther, “The Second Article, Redemption,” “The Creed,” in A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, A Handbook of Christian Teaching (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), p. 10. This was the version that I memorized as a child.


13 Ibid., p. 47.
Jesus' peculiar lordship is not the conventional lordship of "bossness," but of "ownership." Ed's insight—let's call it, Ed's critical theology of lordship—deserves serious attention because the U.S. national culture increasingly fixates itself as an "ownership society." "Ownership," yes; though surely not according to any old conventional Western version of "ownership." Might not Luther himself catch a strong whiff of this developing Western odor as he notes that Jesus' redemption is "not with gold or silver," the precise medium of Western ownership? Schroeder's second "chronic deficit" provides the needed clue: "our culture's image about our own Western selves," our "superior, if not even supercilious" posture, our "self-assumed superior tone" (8, 9). Remember as well that our supercilious posture supplies us with a "western cultural curtain" which systematically distorts not only us Westerners, but Jesus as well. Bonhoeffer's Christological critique of Barth will help to sharpen a critical theology of lordship that promotes the confession of Christ for us today.

II. Bonhoeffer's 1930 Critique of Barth

While in Tegel Prison in 1944 Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned his most famous critique of Barth. He sent personal letters on May 5 and June 8 to his closest friend Eberhard Bethge indicting Barth's theology of revelation as "a positivist doctrine of revelation." The critique stung, even stunned, Barth himself. It's been the subject of much scholarly research ever since. Barth was stunned because he had greatly influenced Bonhoeffer, as everyone knows. This too has been well researched and debated. I will not treat either the "positivism of revelation" question or the influence question here. Rather, I will focus on Bonhoeffer's earlier criticism of Barth because it has a direct bearing on Bonhoeffer's Christological confession, "God is a God who bears."

Bonhoeffer's criticism of Barth appears in Act and Being completed in February 1930. The work is a complex, academic treatise that seeks to gain clarity about the theological concept

14 Ed's teacher, Werner Elert, also engaged in critical Christology with his critique of the threefold office of Christ.threefold office of Christ, which Calvin made so standard in Protestantism. See Elert, The Christian Faith (typescript) XII.58, pp. 225-228.


17 The full title is: Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Theology in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). This is his Habilitationsschrift, which is a second dissertation required in the German system for those headed toward university teaching. In order to read this dissertation readers must already be familiar with the prior century or two of German philosophy and theology, with thinkers like, Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Fichte, Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger, Przywara, Tillich, Bultmann, and, of course, Barth; as well as with Aquinas, Scotus, Occam, and Luther and Calvin. Bonhoeffer had already criticized Barth's second edition of The Epistle to the Romans (1922) (trans. W. Montgomery (New York:
of revelation and its significance by engaging then-current, parallel philosophical discussions. The dialectical or crisis theology of the early Barth and others had introduced the concept of revelation as the key way to criticize nineteenth-century, German liberal Protestant theology and to go beyond it. Barth had argued that liberal Protestant theology had reduced theology to anthropology and Christian faith to mere “religion.”\(^{18}\) He claimed that a singular focus on the concept of divine revelation would reveal the bankruptcy of liberal Protestantism’s anthropocentrism. Bonhoeffer agreed with this basic criticism, which was aimed also at his own Berlin teachers, like Reinhold Seeberg, Adolf von Harnack and Karl Holl.\(^{19}\) Liberal theology had, as Bonhoeffer would say years later, “conceded to the world the right to determine Christ’s place in the world;” it became a “compromise” with modernity’s assumed optimism, progressivism, and superiority.\(^{20}\) Still, Bonhoeffer did not find Barth’s theology of revelation completely satisfying, nor did he find certain basic insights of liberal theology totally bankrupt.

Barth frames his theology of revelation around notions of God’s absolute “freedom” and, therefore, the pure “contingency” of divine revelation. These notions go back preeminently to the nominalist philosophical theologies of Duns Scotus and William of Occam in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Barth conceives God’s Lordship, God’s sovereignty, God’s glory as God’s absolute, free will to do anything God wants to, to reveal God’s self or not. Only in this way, thinks Barth, is God’s revelation safe from being distorted, manipulated, or exploited by human reason or will. Concisely summarizing Barth, Bonhoeffer notes: “Revelation is an event that has its basis in the freedom of God” (Act and Being, 82). Then, Bonhoeffer continues his explanation of Barth’s project.

God is free inasmuch as God is bound to nothing, not even the “existing,” “historical” Word. The Word as truly God’s is free. God can give or withhold the divine self according to absolute favor, remaining in either case free. Never is God at the disposal of human beings; it is God’s glory that, in relation to everything given and conditional, God remains utterly free, unconditioned. (Act and Being, 82)

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18 In Barth’s The Epistle to the Romans (1922) we find the “early” Barth, before his “change.” Bonhoeffer first read Barth in winter 1924/25 and was already bringing Barth into his classroom discussions with Harnack. See Pangritz, Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 15. Also see Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography, Revised Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p. 67 (hereafter cited as Bethge, Bonhoeffer). Pangritz offers rich resources for the Bonhoeffer-Barth connection, though I differ from his overall assessment.

19 For instance, the famous 1923 controversy between Barth and Harnack is reprinted in James M. Robinson, ed., The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), pp. 163-187. Bonhoeffer was quite indebted to Holl’s focus on Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone. However, Holl’s interpretation of Luther’s theology “as a religion of conscience” left Holl vulnerable to liberal anthropocentrism. Holl’s interpretation of Luther was defective, argues Bonhoeffer in his July 31, 1930 inaugural lecture at the University of Berlin, because Holl had “a remarkably scant estimation of Luther’s Christology” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Man in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology,” in No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936 from the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Vol. 1, ed. Edwin Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 61.

God’s revelation must be pure act, therefore. Bonhoeffer quotes from Barth’s 1927 Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf [Christian Dogmatics in Outline].

The relation between God and human beings, in which God’s revelation to me, to a human being, is truly imparted, would have to be free and not static in the sense that its constancy could never mean anything other than the constancy of an action that is not only continuous but in every instance beginning, in all seriousness, at the beginning. This relation should never be thought of as already given, already obtaining, nor from the viewpoint of a law of nature or a function of mathematics but always as a matter of action [aktuell], that is, with all the instability of a deed being done right now. (Act and Being, 82-83)

“How could it be otherwise,” muses Bonhoeffer, since, as sovereign, “God has sole control?” (Act and Being, 83). This is Barth’s “actualism.”

Still, Bonhoeffer is not satisfied. He suspects that Immanuel Kant, the epitome of Western modernity, is “lurking here” behind the scene. Like Kant, Barth is out to limit human reason. Human reason as “conceptual form or . . . systematic thought” is not in control; God is in control (Act and Being, 84). But, argues Bonhoeffer, limiting reason in this way, that is, by keeping God “at a distance,” means that Barth surrenders true temporality. “It follows that, even though Barth readily uses temporal categories . . ., his concept of act still should not be regarded as temporal. God’s freedom and the act of faith are essentially supratemporal” (Act and Being, 84). Barth’s attempt to give the Kantian, transcendental concept of act a historical meaning is “bound to fail” (Act and Being, 84). For Barth, as for Kant, “no historical moment is capax infiniti,” capable of the infinite.

Bonhoeffer’s criticism of Barth draws on a neuralgic Lutheran-Calvinist dispute:

God recedes into the nonobjective, into what is beyond our disposition. That is the necessary consequence of the formal conception of God’s freedom, which might be demonstrated without difficulty also in the relationship between nominalism and the concept of contingency at the close of the Middle Ages.

God remains always the Lord, always subject, so that whoever claims to have God as an object no longer has God; God is always the God who “comes” and never the God who “is there” ([says] Barth). (Act and Being, 85)

Barth’s God can never “be there.” There is only “act” not “being.”

It is noteworthy how readily Barth’s “formal” concept of God’s freedom accommodates itself to the modern Western notion of the “subject,” what Schroeder calls “the Western self.” First, the modern self adopts an “objectivating attitude,” which makes everything that is not itself into an object. Under this objectivating attitude the self is “always subject” and thus “nonobjective.” By objectivating the other, the modern subject seeks to master these objects, to

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control them, to have them at its disposal and, therefore, not vice versa.\textsuperscript{22} The notion of the modern subject surreptitiously fills Barth's formal concept of God's Lordship. That's Bonhoeffer's worry.\textsuperscript{23} We can say that Barth has reversed modernity but not overcome it. The modern subject remains, more emphatic now than ever. Barth merely relocates the modern subject in deity rather than in humanity. While Barth's approach surely explodes Western human pretensions, that's still not good enough news for Bonhoeffer in 1930. Barth's doctrine of God hasn't traveled far enough from Schroeder's second chronic deficit of Western Christians.

Bonhoeffer presses his critique of Barth's purely formal concept of God's Lordship and proposes a provisional way forward, a Lutheran christological way.

The entire situation raises the question whether the formalistic-actualistic understanding of the freedom and contingency of God in revelation is to be made the foundation of theological thought. In revelation it is not so much a question of the freedom of God—eternally remaining within the divine self, aseity—on the other side of revelation, as it is of God's coming out of God's own self in revelation. It is a matter of God's given Word, the covenant in which God is bound by God's own action. It is a question of the freedom of God, which finds its strongest evidence precisely in that God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings and to be placed at the disposal of human beings. God is free not so much from human beings but for them. Christ is the word of God's freedom. God is present, that is, not in eternal nonobjectivity but—to put it quite provisionally for now—'haveable,' graspable in the Word within the church. Here the formal understanding of God's freedom is countered by a substantial one.\textsuperscript{24}

We don't have to determine here whether Bonhoeffer's formulations are entirely adequate.\textsuperscript{25} It is enough for now to focus on Bonhoeffer's "haveable." Just a few pages earlier Bonhoeffer had quoted from Luther's treatise, "That These Words of Christ, 'This is my Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics" (1527). Here Luther stresses the God who gets "handled" by humans. "It is the honor of our God, however, that, in giving the divine self for our sake in deepest condescension, entering into flesh and bread, into our mouth, heart and bowel


\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Act and Being}, 125.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Act and Being}, 90-91. Bonhoeffer credits Luther with these crucial insights (\textit{Act and Being}, 116-117, 120-121). Interpreters of Bonhoeffer have pointed this out. See, for example, Eberhard Bethge, "The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Theology," \textit{Chicago Theological Seminary Bulletin} L1.2 (February 961):8-10. Pangritz would likely consider my interpretation of Bonhoeffer's Christology as just another "coopting of Bonhoeffer for the Lutheran party against Barth" (10). At this point in time it's surely safe to say that the Barthians reverse cooption has been more effective. Clifford Green's efforts help to unloose—not cut—the Barthian Gordian knot. See Clifford Green, \textit{Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality}, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

\textsuperscript{25} For instance, we could criticize his Hegelian formulation—"God's coming out of God's own self in revelation"—and counter with a more robust perichoretic understanding of the trinity. See Gary M. Simpson, "No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revisioning the Trinity," \textit{Word & World} XVIII.3 (Summer 1998):264-271.
and suffering for our sake, God be dishonorably handled, both on the altar and the cross.”

God’s “substantial,” “true” freedom is Christ being there for us, “God binds God’s self to human beings” (Act and Being, 112).

In 1930 Bonhoeffer’s intuitions and insights lean determinedly toward theology of the cross. They eventually lead him to his now-famous July 16, 1944 prison confession, “only the suffering God can help.” With this “only” Bonhoeffer proceeds to reject other “god” proposals of help. Which “god” proposals? In the letter he specifically rejects the “omnipotent” god proposal of classic “Christian” theology, which ironically spawned a plethora of modern deist, pantheist, and atheist counter-proposals. Proposal and counter-proposals remain tied at the tail.

I suggest that with this “only” Bonhoeffer is also rejecting the dominant Christological implication of his most famous book, Discipleship (1937). A complete analysis would take us beyond what we can undertake here. We would need a detailed investigation of the development of his thought during the crucial years between 1932 and 1937. This requires three things. First, it requires an analysis of his Christology lectures during the summer of 1933. Second, it requires close attention to an intense personal struggle during 1932 and to his biblical studies at the time in which he sought an answer to the crisis. Finally, it requires a close critical scrutiny of Discipleship, which brings the Finkenwalde Seminary period to a close. Here I’ll look only at Discipleship and then only briefly at one critical issue within it. Still, this restrained look will sharpen for us Schroeder’s critical theology of Lordship as ownership, which could be overlooked because it remains implicit.

III. Bonhoeffer’s “A God Who Bears”

In 1932 at the age of twenty-six Bonhoeffer faced, as twenty-somethings do, a personal crisis. The nature of the crisis can be reconstructed though the details remain shrouded. In a now well-known letter from Tegel Prison on April 22, 1944 to his best friend Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer recalls this “change.” “There are people who change, and others who can hardly change at all. I don’t think I’ve ever changed very much, except perhaps at the time of my first impressions abroad and under the first conscious influence of father’s personality. It was then that I turned from phraseology to reality.” The change was “momentous.”

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27 LPP, 361.

28 Numerous scholars have investigated the theological development of Bonhoeffer’s Christology. Bethge claims “a broad continuity” (Bonhoeffer, 889] precisely in the Christology of Act and Being (and also Santorum Communio) and the Christology of Letters and Papers from Prison. Green investigates and supports Bethge’s claim (Bonhoeffer). Bethge notes that even certain Lutheran Finkenwaldians—Gerhard Ebeling and Helmut Thielicke, for instance—perked up when they read Letters and Papers from Prison for the first time in 1951 because they found a different, especially insightful Bonhoeffer.

29 LPP, 275.
Bonhoeffer did not talk about this change publicly or with his students or with most of his friends. Those who came to know him after 1932 just assumed that the Bonhoeffer they knew was the only Bonhoeffer that ever existed. Prior to 1932, however, Bonhoeffer exercised, in his own words, “an . . . ambition that many noticed in me [which] made my life difficult.” He worked “in a very unchristian way” and used his considerable intellectual capabilities in such a way that “I 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.” Bonhoeffer exercised an overbearing, “dominating ego.”

In what way does *Discipleship* resolve Bonhoeffer’s personal crisis? Quite simply, *Discipleship* proposes to discipline Bonhoeffer’s big ego by asserting the presence of a bigger, more authoritative ego who commands Bonhoeffer’s ego to yield in obedience. Jesus is that commanding presence. This commanding Christ augments to the point of supplanting Bonhoeffer’s earlier Christology focused around the sociality of “vicarious representative action.” The commanding Christ is the omnipotent God personally present. The theme of disciplinary obedience is the new anthropological component, which augments to the point of supplanting Bonhoeffer’s earlier human personhood based on faith alone in Christ. Bonhoeffer locates these supplanting insights within his analysis of Protestant, especially Lutheran, cheap grace. He names his augmented Christological and anthropological insights “costly grace.” Famously he says, “Like ravens we have gathered around the carcass of cheap grace. From it we have imbibed the poison which has killed the following of Jesus among us.” According to costly

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31 These words come from a letter that Bonhoeffer wrote to an acquaintance on January 27, 1936. I quote them selectively from Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 204-205.

32 This is Clifford Green’s phrase in *Bonhoeffer*, p. 111. I am persuaded by the basic thrust of Green’s analysis which focuses upon “an ‘autobiographical dimension’ which must be recognized in order fully to understand its [*Discipleship*’s] text, and that it contains unresolved theological and personal problems which grow out of the 1932 experience and point forward to their resolution in the prison letters” (p. 107). I also subscribe to Green’s caveat. A theological analysis of Bonhoeffer that attends to an autobiographical *dimension* must also resist “any form of psychological reductionism.” It is precisely the autobiographical dimension of theology that rightfully attracts many to Bonhoeffer. This also makes the caveat salutary. Green also connects the dimension of personal power to the dimension of socio-political power within Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer’s resolution of the personal, however ambiguous, helped resolve the socio-political, again however ambiguous. I will not pursue these last important issues here. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Volume 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

33 Green’s summary is: “Bonhoeffer tries to resolve the problems of the powerful and self-satisfied ego by a doctrine of absolute, obedient discipleship to the commanding Christ of the Sermon on the Mount” (*Bonhoeffer*, 142). Bonhoeffer developed his Christology of “vicarious representative action” [*Stellvertretung*] in *Sanctorum Communio* (1927) and in *Act and Being*.

34 For the significance of *sola fide* in Bonhoeffer see especially *Act and Being*, 116-117.
only the believers obey, and only the obedient believe." The dominating presence of the commanding Christ funds costly grace.

In another well-known prison letter from July 21, 1944, the day after the conspiracy failed to assassinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer reflects on Discipleship.

I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor. We were asking ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it's quite likely that he did become one). At the time I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith. For a long time I didn't realize the depth of the contrast. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. I suppose I wrote Discipleship as the end of that path. Today I can see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by what I wrote. (LPP, 369)

This prison-situated self-criticism can help readers of Discipleship encounter similar dangers in themselves as well. Bonhoeffer’s semi-Pelagian dangers intertwine with Discipleship’s predominant commanding Christ. By recognizing this entwinement readers can also discern another “subordinate Christological motif” within Discipleship. In this subordinate motif we meet a different Christ, a crucified Christ, “the suffering God.” Within this submerged motif we have the Bonhoeffer influenced by Luther. We also can see in this subordinate theme the continuity between the early (1927-32) and the late (1939-45) Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer’s rich metaphor in Discipleship for this cruciform Christ is God as bearer. “God is a God who bears” (Discipleship, 90). Bonhoeffer continues. “The Son of God bore our flesh. He therefore bore the cross. He bore all our sins and attained reconciliation by his bearing.” Such bearing, Bonhoeffer notes, constitutes “that kind of Lord” which Jesus is rather than some other kind of lordship (Discipleship, 85). Here Bonhoeffer tips his critical Christology of Lordship in a cruciform direction, admittedly still not the cantus firmus of Discipleship.

We’ll distill four insights from Bonhoeffer’s “bearing” image. First, “bearing” lordship decidedly and scandalously goes against the grain of other forms of “lordship” recognizable

35 Discipleship, 53ff. and 63ff. Green analyzes in great depth what we can here only summarize (see Bonhoeffer, 105-184). Green also notes how this autobiographical orientation focuses the “soteriological character of Bonhoeffer’s Christology” (210). Bonhoeffer’s faith-obedience formulations originate in his reflections along with Emil Brunner (see Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, p. 63, n. 16).

36 Green, 173. Green rightly calls this subordinate Christological motif “a form of theologia crucis” (173). Here I will do what Green does not, i.e., focus on Bonhoeffer’s metaphor that prominently communicates this cruciform Christ.

37 In Discipleship, Bonhoeffer constantly uses the rhetorical metaphor of bearing rather than his more doctrinal category of “vicarious representative action” [Stellvertretung]. He had employed Stellvertretung already in Sanctorum Communio (1927) and still does use it sparsely in Discipleship (eg. 90). Of course, “bearing” is a broadly based biblical metaphor. Luther employs it often. See, for instance, Luther’s famous “joyous exchange” lecture on Galatians 3:13 where he explicitly inquires “But what does it mean to ‘bear’?” (Lectures on Galatians (1531/35) LW 26, 276-291).
throughout “world” (*Discipleship*, 85). In light of Schroeder’s analysis we might add, especially throughout the Western world and its sphere of influence. We’ll elaborate on this point below.

Second, such “bearing” of our flesh, cross, and sins distinguishes Christ’s suffering from general suffering “that stems from natural existence” (*Discipleship*, 86), the suffering of “something tragic” (*Discipleship*, 85) or “random” or “misfortune” or “harsh fate”(*Discipleship*, 86). Natural suffering elicits natural compassion in others because natural suffering reveals the more encompassing reality of natural “value,” “honor,” and “dignity” (*Discipleship*, 85). People would readily “celebrate” (*Discipleship*, 85) such a naturally suffering Jesus. Bonhoeffer detects a difference. “But Jesus is the Christ who was rejected in his suffering” (*Discipleship*, 85). His chooses Mark 8:31-38 instead of Matthew 16:21-28—remembering that the Gospel of Matthew is the scriptural mainstay of *Discipleship*—because Mark includes being rejected and Matthew does not. “Jesus Christ has to suffer and be rejected. God’s promise requires this, so that scripture may be fulfilled. Suffering and being rejected are not the same” (*Discipleship*, 84). “The cross is ... necessary suffering. ... The essence of the cross is not suffering alone; it is suffering and being rejected” (*Discipleship*, 86). Jesus’ “dishonorable” (*Discipleship*, 85) bearing differentiates his suffering, thus, evoking rejection.

Third, Christ’s suffering bears God-forsakenness. This is where Schroeder’s “why Jesus” question emerges in Bonhoeffer.

Suffering is distance from God. That is why someone who is in communion with God cannot suffer. Jesus affirmed this Old Testament testimony [Matt. 27:46 quoting Ps. 22:1]. That is why he takes the suffering of the whole world onto himself and overcomes it. He bears the whole distance from God. Drinking the cup [of wrath] is what makes it pass from him. In order to overcome the suffering of the world Jesus must drink it to the dregs. Indeed, suffering remains distance from God, but in communion with the suffering of Jesus Christ, suffering is overcome by suffering. Communion with God is granted precisely in suffering. (*Discipleship*, 90)

Fourth, through Word and Sacraments Christ’s bearing-form takes form in Christian discipleship, in Christian “following after”—Nachfolge—in the church, indeed, as church. Bonhoeffer emphasizes that Christ’s cross becomes every Christians in a two-fold way. “The first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is ... the death of the old self. ... The cross is not the end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ.” Famously, Bonhoeffer announces: “Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death” (*Discipleship*, 87).38 This critical or negative side of the cross is necessary. The bearing Christ bears our old self and in this way puts it to death.

Still there’s another side. Precisely in bearing our old selves to death Christ bequeaths to us his bearing form. Bearing is now the generated and generative form of the Christian life of discipleship. That’s the second side of Christ’s cross. “Jesus Christ passes on the fruit of his suffering to those who follow him” (*Discipleship*, 88). Christian suffering is the fruit of Christ’s suffering. It is not self-chosen; it is self-denial. “Self-denial can never result in ever so many

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38 Reginald Fuller’s famous 1948 English translation still rings in many people’s ears: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”
single acts of self-martyrdom or ascetic exercises. It does not mean suicide, because even suicide could be the expression of the human person’s own will” (Discipleship, 86). Bonhoeffer follows Luther here: “Discipleship is passio passive [passive suffering], having to suffer. That is why Luther could count suffering among the marks of the true church” (Discipleship, 89).

Here we have the second “Christ-suffering,” the church, the community of forgiveness of sins.

So Christians become bearers of sin and guilt for other people. Christians would be broken by the weight if they were not themselves carried by him who bore all sins. Instead, by the power of Christ’s suffering, they can overcome the sins they must bear by forgiving them. A Christian becomes a burden-bearer—bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). As Christ bears our burdens so we are to bear the burden of our sisters and brothers . . . [which] is not only his or her external fate, manner, and temperament; rather, it is in the deepest sense his or her sin. I cannot bear it except by forgiving it, by the power of Christ’s cross, which I have come to share. (Discipleship, 88)

To paraphrase Bonhoeffer, we might call this “rich grace.” Christ’s sharing or bequeathing is the inalienable other side of his bearing. Bearing and bequeathing, therefore, are the essential form of the church. 39 This form makes for “the joy of discipleship” (Discipleship, 86).

IV. Intensifying Schroeder’s Critical Theology of Lordship

The “bearing God” of Discipleship emerges prominently in the late Bonhoeffer as Christ “the man for others” (LPP, 382). “The man for others” designation could, however, be merely one more expression of the Western aristocratic paternalist, benefactor tradition which confronts Setiloane. The Western, benefactor Christ is always “for others,” for those poor, primitive others’ own good. In this way Western benefactor traditions always give not only “out of their abundance” (Lk 21:4) but also from a distance, “superciliously,” as Schroeder notes. 40

This Western benefactor tradition has implanted itself deeply in the dominant Western notions and practices of “ownership.” Sovereign Lordship functions according to the ancient Roman law of property. A Lord has his property at his absolute free and arbitrary disposal. Aristocratic ownership gained entry into Protestant theological and Christological reflection through medieval nominalism and gained prominence in twentieth-century theology through

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39 You can notice Luther’s influence on Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology Martin Luther’s (1519) “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods” (LW 35, 49-73).

none other than Karl Barth. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer rightly pointed out how thoroughly nominalism holds sway in America.

Bonhoeffer, however, always pairs the for-ness of Christ with the with-ness of Christ. Indeed, Bonhoeffer places Christ "with" others before the "for" others. The "with" obliterates the supercilious distance of the benefactor tradition. The "with" conditions the "for" and vice versa: "one is possible only through the other." Bearing with sufferers and sinners, Jesus bequeaths to them his Sonship "for" their life, his bearing existence as their life.

Bonhoeffer’s "bearing God" as critical reconstruction of Western aristocratic, beneficent ownership persuades us to look again at Schroeder’s use of the notion of “ownership” to interpret Luther on redemption. Schroeder is surely right to point to “all the ownership-transfer rhetoric” in Luther’s catechism and to call this “mercy” ownership. Still, given the pervasive captivity of American property ownership, it’s salutary to intensify Schroeder’s critique by having recourse to another of Schroeder’s favorite Luther metaphors: redemption as joyous exchange.

Luther’s joyous exchange Christological soteriology employs a quite different semantic field for “belonging” than property ownership. Schroeder cites Luther’s explanation of Thesis 37 from the Explanation of the Ninety-five Theses as the connection between theology of the cross and trusting the promise. Here is Luther, as quoted by Ed.

It is impossible for one to be a Christian unless he possesses Christ. If he possesses Christ, he possesses at the same time all the benefits of Christ. . . . Righteousness, strength, patience, humility, even all the merits of Christ are his through the unity of the Spirit by faith in him. All his sins are no longer his; but through that same unity with Christ everything is swallowed up in him. And this is the confidence that Christians have and our real joy of conscience, that by means of faith our sins become no longer ours but Christ’s . . . (and) all the righteousness of Christ becomes ours. Indeed, this most pleasant participation in the benefits of Christ and joyful change of life do not take place except by faith.


44 Luther, LW 31, 189-191 (italics added by Schroeder.).
Not property ownership but (nuptial) love funds this kind of belongingness. What belongs to each belongs to the other completely. Such "participatory exchange," notes Schroeder, means "swapping possessions with Christ." Reminiscent of Bonhoeffer’s haveable, Schroeder notes “Christum habere [to have Christ] is Luther’s fuller definition for faith.” How true, how new, how good that the “God who bears” provides the festal form of the only Lord worth having!
