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Practical Theology as Social Ethical Action in Christian Ministry

Implications from Emmanuel Levinas and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Andrew Root

Introduction

Practical theology, unlike the other theological disciplines, specifically directs itself toward the contemporary moment. It puts the church's historical theological confessions in conversation with the present conflicts and contemplations of the contemporary church and the larger society in which it is found, opening lines of mutual conversation and critique. Practical theology has argued that theology is in continual and constant development, moving and advancing within this convergence of past reflection and present confrontation. As the church continues ministering in the world, so too must its theology continue to develop and transition. I assert in this article that the context for constructing Christian theology can only be the church's ministry in the world. I will contend that the ministry of the church in the world is what provides both the context and the material for intentionally constructing theology.

If Christian ministry is the context and material for Christian theology, however, we must ask, What is ministry? I am suggesting that, at its heart, ministry is ethical action for the other who is both near and far neighbor. To make this point, I will look to Emmanuel Levinas. I argue that if theology is done as practical theology, deliberately uniting theory and practice, it avoids the problems that Levinas sees with the discipline and makes it possible to use his philosophy in constructing a practical theology for the other.¹

1 Levinas himself supports this task of melding theory and practice, asserting that on the road of ethical action one confronts the transcendent metaphysical other. "The traditional opposition between theory and practice will disappear before the metaphysical transcendence by which a relation with the absolutely other, or truth, is established, and of which ethics is the royal road We shall go further, and, at the risk of appearing to confuse theory and practice, deal with both as modes of metaphysical transcendence." Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Pittsburgh (Duquesne University Press) 1961, 29. This will be further developed in the remainder of this article.

I will begin by laying out some of the major pillars of Levinas's thought before turning directly to his critique of theology. Making Levinas applicable will require a Christological reading. I will turn to Ray Anderson and his discussion of the unity of theology and ministry, showing the importance of a trinitarian understanding of theology. Next, to demonstrate both the possibility and potential in this kind of reading, I will place Levinas in dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, first showing how Bonhoeffer's theology is itself a practical theology, then looking directly at similarities between Levinas's and Bonhoeffer's methods. Finally, I will conclude by asserting that social ethical responsibility set forth by both Levinas and Bonhoeffer is a paradigm and location for doing practical theology.

The Pillars of Levinas's Method

Levinas's philosophy seeks to correct that which he believes is the error of Western philosophy, most dramatically encompassed in the thought of his former philosophical mentor, Martin Heidegger. This error is the tendency for the knower to think it is possible to thematize the other in such a way as to make him or her totalized in his or her being. Hence, I am able from the position of my "I" to conceptualize, in totality, what it means for the other to be the other. I think I can grasp him or her fully, for I and the other share in the existential state of our being (which for Heidegger is *angst*). This totalization can lead only to violence, according to Levinas, never moving the I to the other in an openness that would allow for ethical action for the other.

Totalization opposes the metaphysical impulse which recognizes that it is impossible for me to know the other truly (as one might know an object, even in our shared experience), for there is a chasm too deep and wide for me to cross. An infinity separates us. The uniqueness of the other stands over against all thoughts and categories I have for her. It is only in a connection to the other in which I recognize her infinity, which is the impossibility for me to grasp and categorize the other, that the experience of the transcendent metaphysical is possible.² "Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolutely other."³ The I/other construct, then, becomes the location for both philosophical contemplation and religious experience.⁴

2 "Whatever be the extension of my thoughts, limited by nothing, the Other cannot be contained by me: he is unthinkable—he is infinite and recognized as such." *Ibid.*, 230. Levinas shows here the infinity of the other and the impossibility of my comprehending this other. This reality reveals the other's transcendence, and in experiencing this other, I myself am thrown into the transcendent.

3 *Ibid.*, 49.

For this I/other construct to exist and not collapse into totalization, I and the other must mutually and distinctly live as subjects, as egoists. For Levinas, the most fundamental expression of one's unique subjective distinction, which escapes outside cognition, is enjoyment. It is in enjoyment that I am freely me, freely I, most completely in touch with myself.⁵ In my egoist act of eating and drinking, I am most aware that I am a subject, that I am an I that refuses to be totalized. At home in my own space, in the space I call mine, I recognize the infinity that separates me from all others.⁶ It is in the enjoyment of the I that separation becomes clear.⁷ In this separation, I recognize the other as other, impossible to totalize, but one to meet openly and uniquely in his or her own enjoyment (distinction) in the hospitality of my home and table, in communion with my own unique humanity. Enjoyment alone does not presuppose ethical action, however. It only presupposes that I am free for the other, free as a differentiated self. Enjoyment is preparatory (and remains continual) for ethics, but is not itself the confronted moment. The enjoying self is thrust into ethics in seeing the face of the other.⁸

The face of the other for Levinas is metaphysical. It is beyond comprehension, beyond totalization. It is beyond the ontological furniture of my existence. It cannot be moved and organized as I please. The face of other in its nudity and uniqueness calls me out to him, to give all to him, to be hostage and completely responsible for him. "The face has turned to me – and this is its very nudity. It is by itself and not by reference to a system."⁹

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- 4 It is here, anticipating our further discussion, that we see how theory and practice are linked for Levinas.
 - 5 Peter Sedgwick continues this thought nicely: "In the light of this Levinas argues that the individuality of the individual is 'enacted' through enjoyment The metaphysical Desire for the Other, in other words, is only possible for a being that is already separated from others." Peter Sedgwick, *Descartes to Derrida*, Malden, Mass (Blackwell) 2001, 188.
 - 6 "Only a subject that eats can be for-the-other, or can signify. Signification, the-one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood." Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, Pittsburgh (Duquesne University Press) 1981, 74.
 - 7 "To love and to enjoy by eating, drinking, being at home, etc, are activities that have not drawn much attention from Western philosophers. By way of his phenomenology of terrestrial existence in light of an all-embracing hedonism, Levinas shows that our search for happiness is not bad at all but rather a necessary condition of the possibility of the self-possession through which the I acquires its autonomous substantiality. In this still-solitary dimension, the law of life is: Enjoy life as much as possible." Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, West Lafayette, Ind. (Purdue University Press) 1993, 23.
 - 8 Levinas explains here how enjoyment leads to "being-for-the-other." He shows that enjoyment itself has passivity about it and it is this passivity that makes true ethical action possible. Without passivity, ethics is turned into a program, hence into totalization. "It is the passivity of being-for-another, which is possible only in the form of giving the very bread I eat. But this one has to first enjoy one's bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one's heart, to give oneself in giving it. Enjoyment is an ineluctable moment of sensibility." Levinas, *Otherwise*, 72.
 - 9 Levinas, *Totality*, 75.

It is not, however, masochistic enmeshment that Levinas desires, for I respond to the other from my own subjective self, from my differentiated, distinct, enjoying self.¹⁰ When I see the face of the other, however, I cannot turn away from the other, for the infinite has appeared. To deny it would be to deny its possibility, making totality operative and transcendence impossible. If only totality is a possibility for humanity, ethics is impossible, for the other is only an item in my existence and cannot place a demand upon me, cannot call me into responsibility. It is only as the transcendent that he can confront me, for he is wholly other from my own being, from my own egoist, enjoying self. It is in this moment of practice, of ethical action, that theory, that philosophy is made known to me. In action alongside the other, truth and objectivity appear.¹¹

I see a face, though, and not a silhouette. There can be no pre-planned or pre-pared ethical actions. There can be no absolutes or foundational ethical obligations. To have such would be to fall into totalization. I see a face, unique from all others. In seeing it and seeing through it, I see all of humanity. The other may be very familiar in my day to day life (parent, child, spouse, colleague), but in seeing her as other, I see her as stranger. In her strangeness, I am opened to the whole of humanity.¹² This other's humanity, this other's face demands my response-ability. In this concrete moment of seeing face to face, I must respond, I must act. In order to see her truly, to peer deep into the unique beauty of her face, I must enter this moment open, prepared for ambiguity, prepared to discover anew reality and truth, and to experience as never before, again, the transcendent.

Infinity cannot be experienced without action. Ethics cannot exist, for Levinas, without responsibility that moves to substitution. Mutuality is not enough. There must be an asymmetrical connection between the I and other.¹³ I must be willing and ready to suffer for the other, to give "the very bread from my mouth to the other." When I meet the other in such

10 "To endure this responsibility, I must, however, be someone: an independent being with an initiative and a concrete existence of its own. What are the conditions for this independence? ... Human selfhood is due to a specific way of commerce with the surrounding reality: to be an ego means to rise out of the elements and dominate them from an independent perspective, for example by eating or drinking." Peperzak, *To the Other*, 23.

11 Levinas continues: "The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me The face brings a notion of truth which, in contradistinction to contemporary ontology, is not the disclosure of an impersonal Neuter, but expression" Levinas, *Totality*, 51.

12 "The other transcends the limits of (self-)consciousness and its horizon; the look and the voice that surprise me are 'too much' for my capacity of assimilation. In this sense, the other comes toward me as a total stranger and from a dimension that surpasses me. The otherness of the other reveals a dimension of 'height': he/she comes 'from on high.'" Peperzak, *To the Other*, 20.

13 "It is ... an asymmetrical relation—I am summoned to a responsibility that is not dependent on reciprocity or equality but on 'looking up' to the other." David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation. Being Transformed*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 1999, 37.

a fashion, I am touched emotionally by him and I am willing to suffer for him, to stand in his place, in the mist of his suffering and tragedy.¹⁴ There is nothing I can deny the other.¹⁵

This does not, however, preempt or destroy my subjective egoist enjoyment, keeping me from being a self. Rather, it is in this radical responsibility that I discover my true humanity, shaken loose from the dusty ropes of self-centered monism. It is only in being-for-the-other that I can be me, the enjoying self.¹⁶ “To realize my responsibility for the Other, I myself must be free and independent; but the sense of my selfhood is my being-for-the-Other.”¹⁷

For Levinas, in this ethical interaction of substitution with the other, language becomes of great importance. It is language that bridges the I and the other.¹⁸ “[T]he relation between the same and the other ... is language.”¹⁹ I cannot act for the other, I cannot stand-in for the other, if I do not understand what it means to be the other. I must allow her to teach me.²⁰ I can only escape totalization by meeting the other in conversation, in language, in the “saying.” This event of language will

14 “To-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-oneself, is to take the bread out of one’s own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one’s own fasting. The for-another characteristic of sensibility is enacted already in the enjoying and savoring, if we can express ourselves in this way.” Levinas, *Otherwise*, 56.

15 “The way the other imposes its enigmatic irreducibility and nonrelativity or absoluteness is by means of a command and a prohibition: You are not allowed to kill me; you must accord me a place under the sun and everything that is necessary to live a truly human life. This demands not only the omission of criminal behavior but simultaneously a positive dedication: the other’s facing me makes me responsible for him/her, and this responsibility has no limits.” Peperzak, *To the Other*, 22.

16 Levinas upholds that in a true relationship of substitution, the I and the other are upheld in their own unique and distinct humanity, and one’s egoist self is not exploded. “An exposure to the other, it is signification, is signification itself, the-one-for-the-other to the point of substitution, but a substitution in separation, that is, responsibility.” Levinas, *Otherwise*, 54. He continues this thought: “In substitution my being that belongs to me and not to another is undone, and it is through this substitution that I am not ‘another,’ but me.” *Ibid.*, 127.

17 Peperzak, *To the Other*, 25.

18 “How are the selves related in the pluralism which resists totality? The main way is by language, which can relate across the ‘abyss of separation’ and at the same time confirm the separation. Levinas even says that ‘the epiphany of the face is wholly language.’ Language is not first of all about a content to be communicated but is rooted in the orientation to the other, in sincerity and frankness, and in responsibility answerable to the other.” Ford, *Self*, 37.

19 Levinas, *Totality*, 39.

20 “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity ... The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching [*enseignement*]. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced.” Levinas, *Totality*, 51.

call me deep, not in simple understanding of the other, but into incarnational substitution for the other.²¹ In hearing, seeing, and conversing, the other's infinity will call me to stand in for her completely. We must allow language to bridge our worlds, to inform us and move us deeper in commitment for one another. One informs me of what it is to be the other by "saying" so.²² In the back and forth drawing out of the saying moment that informs me and draws me deeper into substitution, in conversation, I realize that I am "elect."²³ I am the elect and chosen one to stand in for this other.²⁴

In this section I have used words from Levinas like "transcendence" and "metaphysical" (Levinas also uses "epiphany" often), but it would not be appropriate to end this section without touching more specifically on just what Levinas means by transcendence, or better, how one experiences or comes in contact with the transcendent or metaphysical, i.e., God. For Levinas, discussing God is unfeasible. God is transcendent, so far outside of being that it is impossible (we have no language) to speak of God.²⁵ This impossibility keeps God from any risk of being totalized. The human, however, can still experience the metaphysical, can still experience transcendence. This is possible through the face of the other. In the ethical act, the human partakes in the divine.²⁶ "Levinas asks in which concrete experience this structure can realize itself. His response is no

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- 21 "Conversation, from the very fact that it maintains the distance between me and the Other, the radical separation in transcendence which prevents the reconstitution of totality, cannot renounce the egoism of its existence; but the very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognizing In the Other a right over this egoism, justifying oneself." *Ibid.*, 40.
- 22 "Saying is a denuding, of the unqualifiable one, the pure someone, unique and chosen; that is, it is an exposedness to the other where no slipping away is possible." Levinas, *Otherwise*, 50. Levinas explains here what the conversation ("saying") can do philosophically and how it works to connect us to the other.
- 23 "'Face' is the word Levinas chooses to indicate the alterity of the Other forbidding me to exercise my narcissistic violence. 'Language' is another expression of the same nucleus of meaning if it is understood as spoken language or discourse and not as a text detached from its author. The Other regards me and speaks to me; you are my interlocutor; 'the face speaks.' This is the concrete way in which I am in relation with the infinite." Peperzak, *To the Other*, 64.
- 24 Peperzak explains further what Levinas means by election: "I have been chosen, neither by myself nor by another's will or decision but by some thing or some no-thing that is present through the Other who shows me his/her face. I have been chosen to be responsible for anybody whom I shall meet. I cannot refuse this election, for it has appointed me as an irreplaceable servant who cannot put this burden on others." *Ibid.*, 28.
- 25 "Our language about or to God should be in agreement with the relation of me to the Other, who is the only 'place' where God is revealed. Only from this perspective can one approach God prudently and respectfully. Not, however, simply as an enlargement of the human Other; for God is not an other *Autrui*, but still other than the human Other." *Ibid.*, 35.
- 26 "Levinas will state ... that the existence of the human other, because of his/her absolute otherness (or infinity) is the only possible revelation of God." *Ibid.*, 109, n.53. "Another looking at me ... signifies the ideal and the divine." *Ibid.*, 111, n.62.

longer simply the traditional one of the Greeks or Christian theologians, who identify the absolutely Other with the unique God above finite beings, but the other human. This is not to say that God is suppressed or abolished.”²⁷ Levinas places ethics within the bodily, and the transcendent within the world.²⁸

We must be cautious, however. The other does not become God for Levinas, nor is God mystically found somehow becoming the other, as if helping the other is helping God or loving the other is loving God. Rather, the other remains the other, and our connection to the other is connection to the other only. We cannot allow our ethics to be distracted by our theology. To “love the sinner, but hate the sin” is in and of itself totalization and, ironically, destroys the possibility of transcendence. Levinas explains,

The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. A relation with the Transcendent free from all captivation by the Transcendent is a social relation. It is here that the Transcendent, infinitely other, solicits us and appeals to us. The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbor, is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence (that is, disengaged from every relation), which expresses itself. His very epiphany consists in soliciting us by his destitution in the face of the Stranger, the widow, and the orphan.²⁹

With some of the major pillars of Levinas’s thought now in place, we can turn to discussing his disdain for theology.

Levinas’s Critique of Theology

Levinas’s basic criticism of theology is that although it speaks of the metaphysical and claims it receives its data from the transcendent, it is not metaphysical. Philosophically, he claims that for theology to be metaphysical is an antilogy. Theology is totalizing. Its pursuit is to categorize the other. Through cognition it claims who and where God is. This project in and of itself makes transcendence impossible, ironically making the theo-

27 *Ibid.*, 61.

28 “The ‘atheism’ of the will, as a necessary condition for ego’s independence, goes together with true religion. The question of how ‘the Other’ must be understood receives an answer in several formulas by which Levinas tries to explain that the relation to the human Other and the revelation to God coincide completely and without fail. The only way of having a relation with God – so is his conviction – is to respond to the interpellation of the human face, to be good. This correspondence is neither a form of participation nor a parallelism between two worlds; God does not incarnate himself in human beings, but there is no other relation to God possible than the generous approach of the human Other in his/her misery. *Autrui* is the absolute that orients the world and its history.” *Ibid.*, 144.

29 Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

logical task superfluous at best and destructive at worst.³⁰ “Metaphysics is enacted in ethical relations. Without the signification they draw from ethics, theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks.”³¹ The theological task is to look ontologically at God, outlining God, asserting what is possible for God and what is not. Theology asserts that there is a divine drama underway, and in asserting such, the freedom of the human other is lost in the totalizing project of the divine. Levinas fears that we, that humanity in our theology, have given God ontology that is too similar to our own,³² making it possible for God to be possessed, keeping God from being an enjoying subject.³³ In other words, for Levinas, theology imprisons God in the reality of the “said” rather than in the moving, acting, unthematized reality of the “saying.” For Levinas, God exists not in the noun but the verb.³⁴

30 Ford explains further what Levinas’s objections are to theology: “Theology, he says, thematizes or objectifies what it should not; it is mythological, or suggests that there is a divine drama in progress in which people are participants, often unwittingly; it suggests that it is possible to participate directly in or have cognitive or emotional access to the life of God; it finds intrinsic links between human nature and the divine; it tends to confuse creation with causality or to conceptualize creation in ontological terms; it makes ontology absolute, with God as the supreme being and therefore inevitably totalitarian; it argues analogically from the world to God; it signifies God in terms of presence, action, efficacy in the world; above all, its alliance with ontology conspires against doing justice to an ethics which resists the assimilation of the other person to oneself and one’s overview, and which finds in the face to face an unsurpassable imperative directness and immediacy.” David F. Ford, *On Substitution*, in: *Facing the Other. The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Sean Hand, Richmond Surrey (Cuzon) 1996, 23. Some of Levinas’s problems we will be unable to pacify, yet that is not the pursuit of this article. Instead, by taking his critique seriously, I intend to show how his philosophical method is helpful to practical theology.

31 Levinas, *Totality*, 79.

32 Ford states nicely Levinas’s purpose in relation to God and theology: “Levinas suggests that the main purpose for the book [*Otherwise than Being*] is ‘to hear a God uncontaminated by Being’, and through the text theology emerges as a discourse that colludes with the contamination.” Ford, *Self*, 50.

33 “Theological language rings untrue or becomes mystical As ontological language, it belongs to the fabric of interests that dominate the state and its religious parallel, the church. Being incapable of disinterestedness, theology impedes transcendence. If seen as an object opposite to a thinking subject that desires knowledge, God is the fulfillment of interested (or ‘erotic’) need ... not the Absolute to which true desire refers This God is the seducer who apes the infinite; he is an enemy of morality and a principle of hate. The nonontologically understood God is nonpresent: he is not a theme, not even in the form of a ‘Thou’ with whom a dialogue would be possible. He cannot be known because as noematic correlate, he would immediately be annihilated in the totalizing knowledge of the subject. Even the question, ‘Does God exist?’ testifies to an irreligious attitude The question belongs in the sphere where interests, security, utility, projects and results, proof and calculations, totality and conatus are at home. The God who is brought to speech there is not strong enough to overcome the death of God that characterizes our times.” Peperzak, *To the Other*, 225.

34 “The limits of the present in which infinity betrays itself break up. Infinity is beyond the scope of the unity of transcendental apperception, cannot be assembled into a present, and refuses being recollected. This negation of the present and of representation finds its

The “other” who is thematized and totalized in the theological task is not just God, but also the human other. If one lives and moves in the world with a categorized God, one will inevitably categorize his or her neighbor. Destroying God’s transcendence will result in the destruction of the transcendence of the human other. With this transcendence destroyed (or ignored), ethics becomes impossible. Neither God nor the human other is free to place a demand upon me, free to elect me for action. Both God and the other become static, allowing me to be for myself rather than for the other.

Levinas suggests that the most theistic stance one can take is to live as an atheist. This frees one from idolatry and allows for ethical action on behalf of the other.³⁵ Without such a stance, when the other approaches me I am not free to give myself to him, but must stop and contemplate what God wants and where God is. This puts God over against the other, keeping me from responsibility for him, keeping God static, keeping the other from meeting me from on high, from being himself metaphysical. Levinas pleads with us to look for the transcendent amongst us, within the inter-personal, for only here will ethics be possible. If transcendence is locked outside of our sensibility, outside of our experiencing it, our only option is to step back from the worldly reality of responsibility, ignoring the other while thematizing the beyond. Levinas states,

The atheism of the metaphysician means, positively, that our relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behavior and not theology, not a thematization, be it a knowledge by analogy, of the attributes of God. God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men. The direct comprehension of God is impossible for a look directed upon him, not because our intelligence is limited, but because the relation with infinity respects the total Transcendence of the other without being bewitched by it, and because our possibility of welcoming him in man goes further than the comprehension that thematizes and encompasses its object.³⁶

positive form in proximity, responsibility and substitution. This makes it different from the propositions of negative theology In proximity, in signification, in my giving of signs, already the Infinite speaks through the witness I bear of it, in my sincerity, in my saying without said, preoriginary saying which is said in the mouth of the very one that receives the witness.” Levinas, *Otherwise*, 151.

35 Ford gives us a helpful hint on how to read Levinas’s perspective at this point, helpful because it keeps us from being too defensive: “To read Levinas with the prophets of biblical Israel in mind is to be reminded of two of their main themes which are inseparably interwoven: rejection of idolatry and passionate concern for right living with other people. Levinas comes as near as possible to identifying the two, and his ‘ethics as first philosophy’ is a rigorous critique of the way in which ‘idols’ of various sorts have so fascinated and dominated the Western intellectual tradition and the civilisation which it has helped to form that the result has been a devastation propensity for violence, murder and war.” Ford, *Self*, 46.

36 Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

Levinas's concerns are well-founded and must not be ignored. From a Christian theological perspective, however, this begs the question whether a Christological, trinitarian reading would not address many of his concerns, and address them in a way that allows for his method, for his philosophy, to stay intact. With this challenge before us, we will turn to practical theologian Ray Anderson, seeing how his understanding of theology differs from the theology that Levinas addresses and critiques.

A Move to Practical Theology: Ministry Leading to a Trinitarian Theology

For Anderson, Christian theology is inseparable from Christian ministry. All theology must be worked out in the field of ministerial practice. He asserts, "Ministry cannot be construed solely as the practical application (or technique) which makes theological knowledge relevant and effective. Theological activity must emerge out of ministry and for the sake of ministry if it is to be in accordance with the divine modality. The 'practice,' of ministry, then, is not only the appropriate context for doing theological thinking, it is itself intrinsically a theological activity."³⁷ Anderson can make this assertion because of his robust understanding of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The ministry of God to the world has come in its fullness in the humanity of Jesus Christ. The concrete historical ministry of Jesus Christ reveals to humanity, unmediated, the nature and person of God.³⁸ This is not totalizing but personal. God meets humanity in the shared social reality. Anderson states,

Revelation does not exist between God and man as an abstract entity which is something else than either God or man, but exists as God himself exists – personally and concretely in relation with man. The possibility of knowing and expressing the Word of God in human thought-forms and in historical events follows upon the actuality of that event in the incarnate life of Jesus If the Word of God stands only as an abstract or existential possibility, separated from the historical context in which it originally came, then ... ministry ... will have no ... content."³⁹

Jesus asserts, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" and "The Father and I are one."⁴⁰ The transcendent has now become historical and

37 Ray Anderson, *A Theology for Ministry*, in: *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray Anderson, Edinburgh (T & T Clark) 1979, 7.

38 "A Christological perspective of ministry is that of ministry which has been accomplished and which continues to be accomplished through the Holy Spirit, who indwells and actualizes the life of the Church. To say that actuality precedes possibility, is to say that God has actually given and upheld both sides of the ministry of the Word [which is revelation and reconciliation]." *Ibid.*, 17.

39 *Ibid.*, 18.

40 John 14:9 and 10:30 (NRSV).

worldly. It remains completely other, while becoming completely for. The Christian church confesses that God now has a human face.⁴¹

With Jesus now resurrected, his ministry continues to be found only in the historical, for death has been conquered allowing for continuity from century to century. In the trinitarian confession of the church, the Spirit of Christ continues Jesus' bodily ministry, for Jesus is alive. It is this confession of a living Christ, a ministering Christ, that results in our theology being more than ontological claims but instead gives equal priority to the ontic. It is the experience of the ontic that shakes our theology loose from sealed containers, calling us to look again.⁴²

The worshipping community partakes in the Spirit that propels both the individual and community out into the world to do as its Lord does, to give itself to and for the world, to minister to its neighbor.⁴³ The Christian is called to find Christ in the world, to find him, as Barth states, with his fellows,⁴⁴ to find Jesus suffering for and loving the other.⁴⁵ To partake in Christ, the Christian must partake in the life of the human other. In Christ, revelation and reconciliation are indivisibly linked. Anderson therefore states, "Because the divine Word and the human response are reciprocally related, so that one cannot be considered apart from the other, revelation and reconciliation participate in the same fundamental paradigm."⁴⁶ This inseparability forces us deep into the human situation to

41 "Jesus' facing of others is in line with his facing of God. It is above all about communicating the good news of this God who is radically different from the God represented by most people's beliefs, fears, expectations and practices." Ford, *Self*, 179.

42 Clifford Green states further: "If the proper question of Christology is 'who is Jesus Christ?' this is a question which can only be asked to the Christ who is present. Christology is not concerned with an ideal of Christ nor with the historical influence of Christ, but with the resurrected Christ, the living God, who is really present. Furthermore, Christ is present as person not in isolation but only in relation to persons." Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, Grand Rapids (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999, 209.

43 "The Holy Spirit unites the doing of ministry to the ministry which has already been accomplished in Christ, establishing a reciprocity between dogma and experientially discloses and disciplines." Anderson, *A Theology*, 8.

44 "If we see Him alone, we do not see Him at all. If we see Him, we see with and around Him in ever-widening circles His disciples, the people, His enemies and the countless millions who have not yet heard His name. We see Him as theirs, determined by them and for them, belonging to each and every one of them What emerges in it is a supreme I wholly determined by and to the Thou." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III.2, Edinburgh (T & T Clark) 1960, 216.

45 "The community does not speak with words alone. It speaks by the very fact of its existence in the world; by its characteristic attitude to world problems; and, moreover and especially, by its silent service to all the handicapped, weak, and needy in the world. It speaks, finally, by the simple fact that it prays for the world. It does all this because this is the purpose of its summons by the Word of God." Karl Barth, *The Place of Theology*, in: *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray Anderson, Edinburgh (T & T Clark) 1979, 44.

46 Anderson, *A Theology*, 12.

hear openly from the other, to see the demand of the other as the demand of Christ. Christian ministry must give itself fully to the other with no reservation, for Christian ministry is the ministry of Jesus who gives all for humanity. It is only in this construct of being for the other that I am with Christ. Thus, it is only here that I can do theology. It is a theology that is never distracted from the face of the other, but in seeing, hearing, and responding to the other, I discover anew (or again) the reality of God. In the face of the other I see the face of Christ, never thematizing it as such, but rather allowing the other to remain him or herself.

Theology must be done in dialogue with this face, this face that is the other who is my historical concrete neighbor, unique and particular. Surely there will be continuity to the “past story” of biblical revelation, for it is the spirit of Christ who is present in my theological ministerial act with the other.⁴⁷ Yet even this “past story” now breathes. It is more than categorized history. More than the “said,” it is the “saying,” for it is not over, but continues to confront me, calling me to understand anew in light of this stranger who is now near.⁴⁸ This makes theology and ethics inseparable, for I discover and partake in the theological only in my obedience to the ethical.⁴⁹ One is left to wonder if Levinas’s thought might not complement the foregoing⁵⁰ when he says,

47 “[W]hen theological thinking is practiced in abstraction from the Church in ministry, it inevitably becomes as much unapplied and irrelevant as pure. When the theological mind of the minister is being educated primarily through experience, an ad hoc theology emerges which owes as much (or more) to methodological and pragmatic concerns as to dogma. The task of working out a theology for ministry begins properly with the task of identifying the nature and place of ministry itself.” Anderson, *A Theology*, 7. I cannot make theology only dogmatic categorization, nor can I refuse to think theoretically and theologically if Jesus Christ is the criterion for ministry, for in His person they are united.

48 “As Christ’s own ministry is unfolded and proclaimed, the Church discovers its own ministry, and its members their own particular ministry. Christ continually discloses his ministry in concrete situations. This disclosure is the source of all true innovation and creativity in ministry. Thus, dogma does not stifle but stimulates creativity.” *Ibid.*, 8.

49 “As a theological discipline, the hermeneutical task of the Church is to continue to search out and seek to be conformed to the hermeneutical structure of revelation itself, as given in Holy Scripture. Thus, the ministry of the Church necessarily involves theological reflection and a correction of its own inevitable tendencies to create ministry for its own justification.” *Ibid.*, 19. This warning is avoided if theology sees its tasks as incarnational, and thus inseparable from ethics.

50 Here David Ford shows the different perspectives of theologian Eberhard Jüngel and Levinas: “It would be possible to ameliorate the tension if Jüngel did not affirm one person, Jesus Christ, as the incarnation of God and therefore as the particular one who is there for all others. As it is, the extremism of Levinas seeing ‘me’ substituting for all confronts Jüngel’s extremism of seeing ‘Jesus Christ’ substituting for all.” Eord, *On Substitution*, 32. This quote shows where Levinas would have a problem with earlier Christological discussion. Yet what I am proposing, following Levinas, is that one is personally called to complete substitution for the Other. Unlike Levinas, I am asserting that I can only receive the power to do so (and to keep the act from being some kind masochistic self-fulfillment) in following Jesus Christ who meets me and partakes with

The work of justice – the uprightness of the face to face – is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced ... Hence metaphysics is enacted where the social relation is enacted – in our relations with men. There can be no “knowledge” of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God. He does not play the role of a mediator. The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed. It is our relations with men, which describe a field of research hardly glimpsed at ... that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of.⁵¹

We have had this Christological conversation mostly behind Levinas’s back. We must now turn our conversation more directly to him. Ford states what may be Levinas’s ultimate concern in such a Christological reading, “In the complex of responsibilities, what worries Levinas most about the cross-centered position ... is that somehow Christianity involves a shifting of responsibility on to that man on the cross, and an infinite pardon which encourages irresponsibility.”⁵² To show that this need not be, I turn now to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, putting him in a more direct conversation with Levinas. Before this is possible, however, it is important to see how Bonhoeffer can be understood as a practical theologian.

Bonhoeffer as a Representative Practical Theologian

Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to write his doctoral dissertation in theology at the University of Berlin at the age of nineteen. He would finish it at twenty-one. The project (which became his first book, *Sanctorum Communio*) discussed the empirical reality of the Christian church, putting sociological theory and dogmatic theology in dialogue. The dissertation was not inspired by his own attendance and participation in the church (he rarely if ever went), but came from his observation while on holiday in Rome of the pilgrims making their way to the Vatican. From his obser-

me in this act. Ford continues giving us further clues to what Levinas’s response might be to this Christological reading: “Levinas is just as hostile as Jüngel to what they both see as the traditional theological concept of analogy leading to a negative apophatic theology, but he does not entertain Jüngel’s singular event of the incarnation through which to construct an alternative. Faith in the event of the incarnation (interpreted through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) is for Jüngel the source of confidence in the capacitation of our language ever anew in parabolic forms. ‘Similarity’ for him means the inexhaustible expressibility of the mystery of this event, God genuinely being offered in human expression. Levinas, for all his more agonistic and self-deconstructing language and his refusal to talk of similarity, yet pivots his philosophy around a proximity, a coming near, an approach which is also inexhaustibly fruitful.” Ford, *Self*, 78.

51 Levinas, *Totality*, 79.

52 Ford, *Self*, 59.

vation of this practice, he was moved to construct a theory.⁵³ What was the church and how was its dogmatic doctrinal understanding connected to its empirical sociological reality? Where was Christ concretely found within it? How could this be justified sociologically? One today may be tempted with good reason to call this a practical theological project, both because of its empirical starting point and its interdisciplinary methodology. Bonhoeffer's project began with what Browning calls the starting point and central move of practical theology, asking, What is going on here? What is happening?⁵⁴

Bonhoeffer spent the academic year of 1930 in New York City at Union Theological Seminary, where he was influenced greatly by fellow student Frank Fisher, an African-American. Fisher exposed Bonhoeffer firsthand both to the hardships of Blacks in Harlem (and elsewhere) and to the vibrant worship style in African-American storefront churches. When Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, he was changed. He was now more interested in pastoral theological thought than systematic or philosophical theology. After returning from New York, Bonhoeffer knew more poignantly that theology could only be discovered in the practice and action of ministry. "Can theologians think, speak, and write theologically unless they really live in the decisive history of humanity which is now being made? Dare we speak of the activity of the living God in history unless we ourselves are part of that action? What will we be able to say about the ethical, political, and psychic issues of humanity today unless we live in this psycho-social reality?"⁵⁵

Bonhoeffer did not abandon his developed theology of sociality but saw more clearly how it related to practice, using it as an arrow to strike at the heart of the political situation facing Germany and the Christian church. Pastor Bonhoeffer now put all his energy into constructing theological concepts that addressed Christian practice and action in the real world, a world that calls for action and responsibility, i.e., for ethics.⁵⁶ His next projects addressed obedience in discipleship (*The Cost of Discipleship*),

53 Practical theology is often understood as interdisciplinary in nature. Clifford Green shows here how Bonhoeffer's work from the start was interdisciplinary. "The interdisciplinary method in *Sanctorum Communio*, then, is identical with that employed in the next work, *Act and Being*. Bonhoeffer appreciates and appropriates insights found in non-theological disciplines. But he is perfectly clear and confident about his method as a theologian. The ultimate criterion is the revelation in Christ. This combination of theological confidence, which manifests his indebtedness to Barth, and intellectual openness, which reflects his Berlin upbringing and education, is refreshing indeed in the theological scene of the late 1920 in Germany." Green, Bonhoeffer, 27.

54 Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology. Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1991, ch. 3.

55 Green, Bonhoeffer, 293.

56 "This integration of theology and life is partly what Bonhoeffer had in mind when he wrote of finding Christ at the center of life in the world, of sharing the sufferings of God, and of learning to have faith by living completely in our history." *Ibid.*, 294.

the practices of Christian community (*Prayer Book of the Bible and Life Together*), and ethics specifically (*Ethics*). Theology for Bonhoeffer was constructive from the start, and its momentum grew as his years and writing progressed. Seeing his theology as interdisciplinary, practice-oriented, ministry-focused, and interpretively-directed, it seems befitting to claim him as a practical theologian.

Bonhoeffer in Conversation with Levinas

Theology and Christology need not lead us away from substitutionary ethics, as Levinas fears. Instead, they have the potential to lead us deeper into such action, to engender responsible ethics for-the-other. We will see this possibility in Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality.

Ethics for Levinas is not based ontologically in a totality of right and wrong, but is discovered in the social interaction of I and the other, of the one being completely for-the-other. Bonhoeffer himself begins his theological project elsewhere than strict theological discussions of ontology, elsewhere than epistemology. He begins, like Levinas, in the social situation, asking in the context of this social reality, Who is Jesus Christ? Where is Jesus Christ? How then must I act?⁵⁷

For Bonhoeffer as for Levinas, ethics is embedded within his anthropology. To be human is to act ethically. The "I" for Bonhoeffer is just as distinct as the enjoying I of Levinas. The individual must be an egoist for the possibility of ethics for Levinas. For Bonhoeffer, he must exist in a dynamic relationality where he is both open to and closed to the other. For the I to be open to another, it must discover itself in its distinction, in its closedness. For one to be open, one must be closed. She must drag her foot in the sand, forming a line and stating, "This is me and that is you." One must know herself as an I, a subject different from all others.⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer states, "Thus the 'openness' of the person demands 'closedness' as a correlative, or one could not speak of openness at all."⁵⁹

57 "Theology imprudently treats the idea of the relation between God and the creature in terms of ontology. It presupposes the logical privilege of totality, as a concept adequate to being. Thus it runs up against the difficulty of understanding that an infinite being would border on or tolerate something outside of itself, or that a free being would send its roots into the infinity of a God." Levinas, *Totality*, 293. It seems to me that Bonhoeffer's theology avoids the overemphasis on ontology of which Levinas accuses the discipline.

58 "The other person is a real *Grenze* to the I, a limit to the dominating ambitions of the self; the other person is also, as embodying the Word of forgiveness *ab extra*, the promise and possibility of the self's liberation into a new existence . . . It is only because Christ is present as person that the self acknowledges the other as a genuine person and not as an entity or merely extant thing." Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 89.

59 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1963, 74.

For both Levinas and Bonhoeffer, philosophy or theology begins with a distinct and differentiated self. For Levinas, the ground for this distinction is the irrefutable phenomenon of the self. For Bonhoeffer, it is phenomenological, but also theological.⁶⁰ In the Christological understanding of Christ as the new humanity, which confronts and opposes all that dehumanizes, the human is given back the self. He is now free to be himself, free from the bondage of both the self and the other, now free to enter into free relationality with the other,⁶¹ or in Levinas's words, to partake in transcendent infinity.

This differentiated self leads both Levinas and Bonhoeffer to the transcendent, into relationship with the metaphysical.⁶² Levinas locates both the philosophical and the metaphysical within the world. In encountering the face of the other, one encounters the transcendent. Bonhoeffer asserts much the same.⁶³ The transcendence of God is now a historical transcendence, for it has embedded itself in the humanity of Jesus Christ,⁶⁴ the

60 Green continues my point: "The phenomenology of transcendence in sociality is that Christ present as person in the other encounters me in the Word; the Word questions my existence by asking me about my love for the neighbor. [...] The present Christ encounters the self whose false social existence is within a solidarity of isolated selves, each being a *cor curvum in se*, heart turned in upon itself (Luther). His Word of judgment and grace liberates the egocentric self for the love of the neighbor, thus creating the mutuality of freedom and love for one another in the community of the new humanity." Green, Bonhoeffer. 216.

61 "Two fundamental assertions are being made in this theological view of human social relationships. First, God is the one who establishes the other as You in relation to the self, thus constituting the self as a person. Second, God is the divine You who encounters the self in the ethical limit and claim of the human 'other,' 'God is a You for us, that is, active will standing over against us.' These two assertions cannot really be separated; since transcendence is to be understood in terms of sociality, they are two aspects of the one relationship." *Ibid.*, 36.

62 "[T]he person is willed by God, in concrete vitality, wholeness, and uniqueness as an ultimate unity. Social relations must be understood, then, as purely interpersonal and building on the uniqueness and separateness of persons Thus the way to the other person's You is the same as the way to the divine You, either through acknowledgment or rejection." Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum*, 55. This statement shows his connection to Levinas in seeing the human both as distinct (making responsibility possible) and transcendent.

63 "A God invisible means not only a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice. Ethics is the spiritual optics." Levinas, *Totality*, 78. Bonhoeffer would agree.

64 Both Bonhoeffer and Levinas have a kind of atheistic theism. We have discussed above how Levinas has placed the transcendence of God so far outside of human contact and manipulation that he claims no correlation between God's being and our own. Ford has called Levinas a prophetic voice, like those in the Old Testament, speaking out against idolatry. Bonhoeffer also feared a kind of theistic idolatry in which God became a stop gap. One of his most puzzling and intriguing statements from Tegel prison is addressed to this concern. He states: "And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *esti deus non duretur* [even if there were no God]. And this is just what we do recognize – before God! God himself compels us to recognize it God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God."

humanity of God.⁶⁵ The spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, is now present in the social relationality of the church in the world, of the individual Christian and his neighbor.⁶⁶ In encountering my neighbor, I am encountering Christ, the transcendent, for God has bound the divine self to humanity. The reconciliation of humanity to God is universal.⁶⁷ Whenever I meet my neighbor in his distinction,⁶⁸ affirming and respecting the boundary that separates the other from me and affirming his own enjoying self, I meet Christ.⁶⁹ When I refuse to totalize the other but stand vulnerable in the wonder of the other's infinity, I meet Christ.⁷⁰ This is not because the other's I is transubstantiated into Christ. Instead, in mutual relationality I partake, as does the other on my behalf, in the ministry of Christ that is giving unique particularity to the subject in the community of the new

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York (Macmillan Publishing Co.) 1953, 360. Bonhoeffer's understanding of God, much like Levinas's, does not keep us from action, suffering, and service, but encounters God only in it, only there revealing God's wonder.

- 65 "For Bonhoeffer, then, transcendence does not refer to an inaccessible otherness or beyondness of God; it refers to the present Christ. But the present Christ is 'other,' 'outside' the self, in such a way that he cannot be drawn into the dominating power of the self-sufficient ego. It is as person that Christ is 'other,' 'outside' the self. Christology states its presupposition about "transcendence, namely, that the Logos is person. This human being is the transcendent." [...] But the Word embodied in another person stands over against the self; each person, as an independent willing subject, is a *Grenze* to the other. Word in the form of person means a personal address which encounters and challenges the self from without. Just as freedom is not an attribute of God's aseity but of God's way of relating to humanity, so transcendence is not an attribute of Christ-in-himself but a relationship of Christ whose *Personstruktur* is a *pro-me-Sein*. He is *pro nobis* as *extra nos*. The form of transcendence is therefore human sociality: the Word embodied in the other person and addressed to me as person is simultaneously *extra me* and *pro me*." Green, Bonhoeffer, 215.
- 66 "Whoever professes to believe in the reality of Jesus Christ, as the revelation of God, must in the same breath profess his faith in both their reality of God and the reality of the world; for in Christ he finds God and the world reconciled Belonging wholly to Christ, he stands at the same time wholly in the world." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ, the Church, and the World*, in: *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray Anderson, Edinburgh (T & T Clark) 1979, 544.
- 67 "In Christ humanity really is drawn into community with God, just as in Adam humanity fell. And even though in the one Adam there are many adams, yet there is only Christ. For Adam is 'representative human being', but Christ is the Lord of his new humanity." Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum*, 146.
- 68 "In other words, one person cannot know the other, but can only acknowledge and 'believe' in the other." *Ibid.*, 54. Bonhoeffer's statement here shows that he is not thinking of the other in a concept of totalization.
- 69 "Accordingly, Bonhoeffer understands the Word of Christ to be historical, in the sense that it encounters people, calling for responsible decision; this encounter occurs in human social relations, and, since the historicity of human *Existenz* consists of decision in this social-ethical encounter with others in community, historicity and sociality are intrinsic to each other." Green, Bonhoeffer, 223.
- 70 "This 'existing for others' which people encounter in Jesus is nothing other than encounter with authentic transcendence." *Ibid.*, 273.

humanity.⁷¹ For Bonhoeffer, loving the other is not simply loving Christ, as if I could say, “I hate him, but love Jesus in him!” Bonhoeffer states, “I do not love God in the ‘neighbor,’ but I love the concrete You; I love the You by placing myself, my entire will, in the service of the You.”⁷²

This possibility of compartmentalization (I hate you, but love Jesus in you!) is exactly what Levinas fears in a Christological perspective. It is only theology, Levinas would assert, that allows one to make such a statement. It is theology that gives categories to humanity, keeping one from the face of the other. The transcendent for Bonhoeffer, however, is in the historical. It is this-worldly, not otherworldly. This means for Bonhoeffer that loving the other is loving the other. The call of Christ is first to the world, in meeting the other as, and only as, the other. I partake in Christ not as a third party, but as I and other shared relationality, as the spirit of sociality, as the objective spirit.⁷³ It is here in the objective spirit that Christ is present, not as a possessed entity, but as an infinity. If I totalize the other in seeing her, denying her infinity, the social or objective spirit that connects us as a sociological reality is degraded and becomes destructive. The objective reality of our sociality is totalization. I state upon seeing her, for example, “That’s a woman thing to do. I know how people like you think. That’s a typical Mexican attitude.” In the objective spirit of totalization, Christ cannot be found. From totalization is bred hatred, violence, and dehumanization, all which the ministry of the historical Christ opposes. Where the objective spirit of our relationality is infinite, however, where I am open to see anew and again this other before me and share in her humanity, Christ is present (making theology possible). We together share in the ministry of Christ, which is the humanization of humanity, of community, in the new humanity.⁷⁴ Therefore

71 Green continues this point of Bonhoeffer’s: “Christ is interpreted as present in human form in the matrix of social relationships; his presence is the reality of the universal new humanity, in its corporate and individual dimensions, and the Christian community is the community of persons where the reality of the new humanity of Christ becomes actual in the social world.” *Ibid.*, 183.

72 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum*, 169.

73 “Objective spirit is thus to be regarded as the connection between historical and communal meaning, between the temporal and spatial intentions of a community. Objective spirit is will exerting itself effectively on members of the community.” *Ibid.*, 99. Bonhoeffer continues: “It leads an individual life ‘beyond’ the individual persons, and yet it is real only through them. The more alive the individual persons, the more powerful the objective spirit. It interacts reciprocally with each individual and with them all. To withdraw from it is to withdraw from the community. It wills historical continuity as well as the social realization of its will.” *Ibid.*, 100.

74 For Levinas, it is language that bridges the infinity of the I and the other. For Bonhoeffer, language is also significant. For both, it is the vehicle to meet the other. Levinas states: “In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, the caress a saying.” Levinas, *Otherwise*, 94. For Bonhoeffer, however, it is given a more nuanced theological understanding. For there to be true human interaction to the depth of ethical substitution, the Word of God must be present in one’s community of shared relationality. This *kerygma* can come in many different forms, but when it comes from the other, it comes as the Word

for Bonhoeffer, it is Christ that allows the I to see the other, for the I to recognize the infinity of the neighbor.⁷⁵

Worldly transcendence is equally important for both Levinas and Bonhoeffer. For both men, it leads to ethics. If philosophy is totalizing, it will lead to violence and war. If theology is otherworldly, it will lead to compliance and inaction, easily molded to the structure of power ideology, and become meaningless. For one to be saved from a philosophy of violence or a theology of meaninglessness, one must be willing to enter into substitution for the other. One must be willing to stand in for the other, acquiring guilt for the other, giving the very food from his mouth to the other. In Bonhoeffer's words, one must become deputy for the other. "The father acts for the children, working for them, caring for them, fighting and suffering for them. Thus in a real sense he is their deputy Deputyship . . . responsibility, lies only in the complete surrender of one's own life to the other man."⁷⁶

To live the Christian life, to partake in theology, to do true philosophy, to avoid totalization, one must delve deep into the life of the other, so deep that one is willing to suffer for the other and to suffer from the other. It is only in this incarnational entering, Levinas would assert (though meaning it in a non-theological way), that ethics and philosophy are possible. For Bonhoeffer, it is only in the responsibility of acquired guilt that ethics and theology are possible. Without it, philosophy becomes impossible because it detaches itself from the metaphysical. Christian theology becomes impossible because it detaches itself from Jesus Christ. "If any man tries to escape guilt in responsibility he detaches himself from the ultimate reality of human existence, and what is more he cuts himself off from the redeeming mystery of Christ's bearing guilt without sin and he has no share in the divine justification which lies upon this event."⁷⁷

of God that places such a demand upon me that I cannot look away without being in disobedience. Green explains Bonhoeffer's position further: "Christ is present as Word in the form of living address between persons. . . . Christ is person, and he encounters us in the word of address from another human person, that is, in the sermon. Word in the form of address requires a hearer and a responsible answer. But this means that the Word is an event in community." Green, Bonhoeffer, 213.

75 Green explains Bonhoeffer's perspective further: "Transcendence is not God's otherness beyond humanity and above the world; the holy, creating, sustaining, and reconciling love of God which is revealed in Christ is God's lordship in the world among human beings God is present in the encounter of individuals and their communities as *Kollektivpersonen*. The 'other,' as individual person and corporate person, is the 'form' in which God is really present as the divine 'Other' in the world. Transcendence in Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality, then, is socio-ethical transcendence. Its form is the social form of human personal life, and its content and goal is to create and redeem community between human beings and Christ and among human beings themselves." *Ibid.*, 64. He adds: "The sociality of the Word in the address-encounters between persons in community means that the other person, as an ethical subject in community, is the form of both the otherness and the presence of Christ." *Ibid.*, 213.

76 Bonhoeffer, Christ, 549.

77 *Ibid.*, 561.

Both Levinas and Bonhoeffer must move to this extreme and uncomfortable position. If the transcendent is historical and found in the relational connection of I and the other, and if philosophy and theology are found only here, then one must be willing to give all in relationality to the other. To refuse substitution, to refuse to stand in for-the-other and give all to the other, is to be a hypocrite.

What is substitution, though, and what does it mean to be for-the-other? Levinas can give examples of what this kind of action may look like and what it might mean. In the end, however, it seems too heavy a burden to carry, too speculative to direct me truly, too lonely to be possible. It rings as powerfully true but seems too slippery to grasp. A substitutionary example would be helpful. Bonhoeffer can give just such an example in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ.

It is Jesus who is the true substitutionary figure. In following Jesus, I find myself being for-the-other. More than just an example, this is a call for vicarious action. I act with my whole self but find the source of my power to act beyond myself. It remains myself that I risk – it is my food I provide, it is my time I give – but in giving it I not only partake unmediated with my neighbor, but unmediated with the Spirit of Christ, who empowers and accompanies me in this ethical act.⁷⁸ In the vicarious power of Jesus Christ and his present power, I go to the other, I stand completely for-the-other.⁷⁹

A love which left man alone in his guilt would not be love for the real man. As one who acts responsibly in the historical existence of men Jesus becomes guilty. It must be emphasized that it is solely His love which makes him incur guilt It is as the one who is without sin that Jesus takes upon Himself the guilt of His brothers, and it is under the burden of this guilt that He shows Himself to be without sin. In this Jesus Christ, who is guilty without sin, lies the origin of every action of responsible deputyship.⁸⁰

An ethic of substitution to the radical extent that Levinas envisions it may only be possible from a theological perspective.⁸¹

78 Bonhoeffer further discusses the extent to which one is responsibility must lead, but he also shows that the power to do such is engendered by the grace of God: “When a man takes guilt upon himself in responsibility, and no responsible man can avoid this, he imputes this guilt to himself and to no one else; he answers for it; he accepts responsibility for it. He does not do this in the insolent presumptuousness of his own power, but he does it in the knowledge that this liberty is forced upon him and that in this liberty he is dependent on grace. Before other men the man of free responsibility is justified by necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience; but before God he hopes only for mercy.” *Ibid.*, 566.

79 “This is why the principle of vicarious representative action can become fundamental for the church-community of God in and through Christ. Not ‘solidarity,’ which is never possible between Christ and human beings, but vicarious representative action is the life-principle of the new humanity.” Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum*, 146-147.

80 Bonhoeffer, *Christ*, 561.

81 “In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point of substitution for others and suffering both from the effect of persecution and from the persecuting

Substitution at this level happens within a deeper understanding of community than allowed for by Levinas. Levinas's discussion of ethics remains only interpersonal. He is skeptical of larger social units. Doubtful that they can truly act ethically, he believes their will is too divided to escape self-interest. Bonhoeffer's whole project, however, is directed to the community. He holds that the community can act ethically, both member to member and church *Gemeinde* to another *Gemeinde*. Bonhoeffer can assert this both because of his sociological/anthropological understanding of community and because of his theological commitments. Bonhoeffer asserts that the social communal spirit interacts with other communities just as the individual spirit interacts with other individuals.⁸² "Every concept of community is essentially related to a concept of person. It is impossible to say what constitutes community without asking what constitutes a person."⁸³ Here, too, the community must be a distinct enjoying (worshipping) community, unique from all others in its rituals. These rituals of worship must be arcane, as Bonhoeffer would assert, not dividing us from other communities but preparing us for action on their behalf. The community, just like the individual, must be open and closed to all others, distinct from the world but completely open to it. For Bonhoeffer, this is possible theologically because Jesus Christ now exists as *Kollektivperson*. He exists in the midst of our individual and communal relations both in the community and in the world. If the community is "in Christ," if it is experiencing life in the *Kollektivperson* of Jesus, it must continue to crucify its own self-interest, binding closer together in one will, risking its very existence in reaching out ethically to the world.

Substitutionary ethics done as *Kollektivperson* seems much more plausible in practical life.⁸⁴ When I am personally confronted for help by my drug-

itself in which the persecutor sinks. Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor." Levinas, *Otherwise*, 75. This quote of Levinas begs for a Christological reading, and peering at it through Bonhoeffer, we can see its possibilities.

82 Green deepens my point: "Bonhoeffer's interpretation of person, it is imperative to understand, is a concept which is corporate as well as individual. This clearly distinguishes his position from philosophers and theologians such as Martin Buber, Eberhard Grisebach, Eriedrich Gogarten, and Emil Brunner. These thinkers made much of the concept of person, and of the I-You relation – which Bonhoeffer also uses. But the concept of the person in their work remains an individual concept, since its locus is in the relation between individuals as I and You; therefore their positions could be described as inter-personal personalism. Bonhoeffer goes beyond this usage in a quite original way to show that the concept of the person is fruitful for understanding corporate human communities, and the relation of individuals to them." Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 30.

83 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum*, 34.

84 "[R]eciprocity between individual and corporate life which is essential in Bonhoeffer's understanding of sociality; it forgets that the ethical is intrinsic to the definition of 'person.' The very reason he applies to communities his own model of the human person is to guarantee that they are understood to have the same ethical-historical character as the individual person Corporate communities as such, *pace* still prevalent ideologies,

addicted relative who needs a place to stay after being evicted from his apartment, I must not turn from his need. Although it is inconvenient and potentially dangerous, I must give all to the other. Another also confronts me, however: my own small child, who demands a safe and calm environment in which to grow. I am stuck between the demand of two opposed others. It is in this bind that I need the community, for we together are called to substitution. We as *Kollektivpersonen* can act without hesitation. I will find a bed for him in the home of one in the community, not making him their problem, but together (as a community) sharing in his need, acting for him ethically. It is then in this ethical act, as community, for the other, that we together enter into ministry and do theology.

Conclusion: Levinas, Practical Theology, and Social Ethical Responsibility

Through this study, we have seen that an understanding of Christian theology as practical theology, as a discipline engendered from the practice of ministry in the presence of the historically transcendent God and the infinite neighbor, has the possibility of avoiding the critical dangers that Levinas perceives with theology. This opens to those in the field of practical theology the depth of Levinas's thought as a resource and direction in constructing praxis-oriented theologies. More importantly, it shows the philosophical necessity of practice leading to theory, of philosophy as ethical action. "The-one-for-the-other is the foundation of theory, for it makes possible relationship" ⁸⁵ Levinas has shown us that this relationship is with the metaphysical. To do philosophy, one must embrace the metaphysical, and the metaphysical can only be found in the historical existence of the human other. This clears the ground, showing that the place of theoretical construction can only be alongside the neighbor.

By reading Levinas alongside Bonhoeffer, we can see how social ethical responsibility is theologically justified and, at points, made more accessible. For both Levinas and Bonhoeffer, we only experience the transcendent when we step out and give ourselves totally to our neighbor, to the other. In doing so, the divine and the human are so fused that to deal with the one is to deal with the other. Bonhoeffer has made this even more concrete

are not ethically neutral; they are ethical 'bodies' as much as the individual person. Accordingly, this corporate use of the concept of person insists that individuals are not private persons but people who have responsibility for the socio-ethical life of their communities; to use 'person' also as a corporate concept is to remind individuals that their personal life essentially includes a corporate dimension Indeed, since there can be no *Kollektivperson* apart from a community of individual persons, it is in individual persons that the call to corporate, ethical responsibility is heard." Green, Bonhoeffer, 42.

85 Levinas, *Otherwise*, 136.

by showing how Jesus Christ is the transcendent other that meets us in the historical ethical action of I and other. In this ethical act, philosophy and theology become possible, for they avoid being only pedantic (and at worst, destructive) exercises, important to only a few tucked away in the damp corners of libraries. Rather, if we are willing to see social ethical action as a paradigm for practical theology, we will be thrust out into the bright light of the lived world, to construct theology together in our ministry, as a collective community, alongside the other who calls, together serving and suffering for the world.

Zusammenfassung

In ihrer Bezugnahme auf konkrete Menschen und die jeweiligen Kontexte, in denen sie leben, vollzieht sich Theologie in einem kontinuierlichen Prozess der Anpassung und des Übergangs. Nach Ansicht des Verfassers ist darum auch die theologische Reflexion pfarramtlicher Praxis stets in einem engen Zusammenhang mit den ethischen Handlungsvollzügen zu sehen, die den Anderen als den nahen oder fernen Nächsten in den Blick nehmen. Diese These wird im Rahmen einer Analyse der Philosophie von Emmanuel Levinas entwickelt. Dabei werden zunächst die Grundzüge seines Denkens dargestellt und gerade auch die Vorbehalte Levinas' gegenüber der Theologie namhaft gemacht. Sodann sucht der Verfasser zu zeigen, dass und wie eine Theologie, die sich prinzipiell als Praktische Theologie im Sinne einer Theologie mit und für den Anderen begreife, viele Befürchtungen von Levinas hinsichtlich der Theologie relativieren könne, und dass sein Denken für Praktische Theologen überaus anregend sei. Um diese Thesen zu untermauern, bringt der Verfasser Levinas' Philosophie und Dietrich Bonhoeffers Theologie miteinander ins Gespräch, wobei sich viele Ähnlichkeiten zeigen und zugleich deuthch wird, wie sich Levinas' Einwände gegenüber der Theologie mit Hilfe von Bonhoeffers theologischen Einsichten entkräften lassen. Der Aufsatz schließt mit der Eorderung, den Aspekt der soziaethischen Verantwortung, deren prinzipielle Bedeutung von Levinas und Bonhoeffer gleichermaßen hervorgehoben worden sei, als ein zentral wichtiges Paradigma praktisch-theologischer Arbeit zu begreifen.



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