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Baptist (Dis)Unity and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Socio-Doctrinal Understanding of the Church¹

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Abstract

In October 2022, The Baptist Union of Great Britain decided to undergo a process of exploring a possible change to on the current rules for ministerial recognition regarding same-sex marriage. This followed a petition by many ministers who wanted the rules to become more inclusive, which resulted in many other ministers petitioning to keep the current rules in place. This article offers a theological argument for the unity of Baptists Together, not despite the differences we hold, but precisely through recognising these differences in our confessional life together. Rather than seeking common ground or a mutual likemindedness, we witness our mutual isolation from God and one another as a (dis)union of congregations, who are soteriologically bound together in Christ's salvific isolation for us. I do not seek to offer an either/or opinion regarding the current ministerial recognition rules. Instead, I challenge Baptists to consider a deeper and more profound source of Christian unity, which constitutes a different paradigm for approaching our life together in the particularities of our polity.

Key Words: same-sex marriage, Bonhoeffer, Baptists, ecclesiology

Introduction

On the sixteenth April 1963, the Baptist preacher and Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., reflected from prison on his travels throughout the American south. His goal had been to understand the systemic schemes and spiritual stories that were written upon the hearts, minds, and bodies of his fellow human beings. In particular, he wanted to understand what fed the imaginations of his White sisters and brothers who, like him, claimed to

¹ It is with heartfelt gratitude that I dedicate this essay to John Colwell, who has been a fellow pilgrim and companion over the last three years, and has charged me to find my own voice. This article probably won't achieve that goal fully, but will hopefully be a step in the right direction.

worship the God revealed in Jesus Christ. As he explored, he witnessed the beautiful architecture of White segregationist churches, true churches that preached the word and observed the sacraments faithfully, whilst simultaneously supporting racial segregation and its concomitant logic for civil laws, both within its polity, and in the public sphere.² King was confronted with a perplexing question as he viewed these sacred spaces, asking himself, ‘What God do these people worship?’³

For King and many of his Black brethren, anyone who pledged allegiance to the vision of a segregated society, could not simultaneously pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ. There were some who disagreed with him, manoeuvring the message of the Gospel to legitimise and even serve racism, or alternatively, to simply relativise its impact as a merely secondary issue. Many White folks considered issues of segregation to be less crucial for a life of faith. They were willing to settle with things as they were, either in the name of God’s providence as they understood it, or by way of a reluctant resignation to their bodily privilege at the expense of others. However, for King and other Black (and some White) believers, this was not a secondary, and therefore an avoidable situation for Christian discipleship. Whilst a society’s loci of power can undoubtedly shift and evolve in time and space, King and others confronted what they believed to be a demonic assertion of power that was, in their minds, anti-Christ, and subsequently, in direct opposition to any coherent vision of human flourishing whatsoever. The *salvation* (and I use that word intentionally) of both Black and White was inseparable, though the concrete realisation of that salvation in human history would obviously require a redressing of their unique stories in diverse ways, encompassed within the story of God we read in the Scriptures.

Division and Difficulties for Baptists

Whilst I could continue writing specifically about racism, my intention has been to foreground the critical importance of concrete issues, not primarily from a practical perspective, but in terms of how our doctrine and ethics inevitably situate and further narrate our life together. In this essay, I want to contribute to another concrete discussion. As I type (October 2022), I am filled with a certain amount of fear and trembling, as well as no small amount of sorrow. Baptist Union Council is currently deliberating over the present ministerial recognition (MR) rules pertaining to same-sex marriage (SSM), and

² Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 85–87, 96.

³ Staughton Lynd (ed.), *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 477.

has agreed on a process to explore what our churches think. At the end of a relatively short period (as far as extensive processes go), a decision will have been made. A pragmatic orientation towards this debate will result in a Yes or No regarding same-sex marriage for accredited Baptist ministers. Our endeavour is constrained upon us to decide within a polemical, either/or manner, leaving less space than some would desire for contemplation, questioning, and a more attentive, theological and biblical enquiry within our polity.

I am not writing from within a vacuum (as though that were even possible). I have good friends within the Baptist Union of Great Britain, both ministers and members, who believe differently to one another about this situation regarding MR rules. I, like others, am seeking to be attentive to viewpoints from different perspectives and am (I hope) open to what the Spirit of Christ might be saying. Certain spaces where this debate is being carried out are intense and hot. I appreciate the reasoning behind some of the extreme discourse that is being deployed. It is lamentable and painful to witness the dehumanisingly dismissive vitriol coming from both extremes, as battle lines are being drawn against those who 'cannot possibly be true disciples of Jesus.' Oh, the grievous and perpetual irony of our human race; we cannot even agree on what is dehumanising!

I sympathise with how hurt or afflicted people feel, and I also suggest that such rhetorical violence makes many of us feel silenced, for fear of getting caught in the crossfire. Perhaps not putting our heads above the parapet (in our preaching, public witness or church stance) is merely a cowardly attempt to evade entering the arena to share in the melee of a genuine discussion (or what may sometimes seem like a fight). However, I am picking up (though I could of course be wrong) that a large proportion of our so-called 'dysfunctional Baptist family'⁴ carry viewpoints that are held closely, if loosely, with genuine openness to being challenged on a theological, biblical and ethical level. It is difficult to engage when we are pre-emptively funneled down a polarised avenue by loud and therefore dominant voices, being forced (perhaps by minorities on the extremes) to choose a side that we may not be altogether aligned with. The context of Council's decision carries a lot of angst, which many of us sense, and for which we continue to pray for those involved in the process before us. Of course, there is also the added texture of many diverse points of departure for the complex continuum of postures within both these perspectives.

⁴ Thanks to my friend, Charmaine Mhlanga for coining this phrase for our movement.

Again, I could be speaking just for myself (though I doubt it), but often, the subject matter quickly becomes less significant than the manner with which a lot of the discussions have taken place. If Jesus had been sinful on the way to the cross, then the cross would have been a waste of time, and whatever *telos* we arrive at within this debate will be vindicated or condemned by the means and ways by which we get there, like Christ himself. To put it differently, we know this is an important issue, which affects individuals and communities in significant (existential, soteriological and missiological) ways, and we are aware that it is understandably painful for many people to engage in it, and so many of us are humbly seeking spaces to hear and dialogue over the issue, ‘journeying together’ as some have said. We want to take it seriously, to *feel* and to *think* and to *pray* about it in communion, in a way that does not force us to buy into the false dichotomy of whether we supposedly care more about either the Bible or loving people. To me, such a juxtaposition is myopic and fails to witness to the full and ultimate reality of God in Christ, whose person and work is the costly reconciliation of all things. Of course, such a reality, such a Gospel, requires qualifying within our theological anthropology, but we do that as those who must appreciate our fallible and necessarily limited human horizons, which requires due consideration of our distinct ecclesiology as Baptists as well.⁵

On a personal level, my deep sadness is that I may potentially lose my baptistic union with someone for whom I care, whatever the outcome. I have a close friend, a Baptist minister, from whom I have learnt a tremendous amount about this subject, who experiences what they call ‘same-sex attraction’ (SSA), but from whose reading of Scripture, believes *they* are called to a life of celibacy. This person has informed me that they would feel unsafe within a union of churches that affirmed the choice of ministers to marry someone from the same sex. In other words, they believe their commitment to singleness as an outworking of their *personal* discipleship to Christ would be jeopardised if the MR rules changed, as the rules would engender a *communal* position that cannot but contradict and compromise the upholding of an individual choice for this specific minister.⁶ It would represent a fundamental rupture in their salvific participation in Christ, leading them to a regrettable departure from our union of churches. They would feel unsafe, but moreover,

⁵ I am only starting to think about the radical nature of a Baptist political theology, and wonder whether the way we “handle” this issue could be a gift to other streams of the church, and indeed, to the world. My thanks to Andy Goodliff for pushing this idea in *The Ruling Christ and Witnessing Church: Towards a Baptist Political Theology* (Oxford: Whitley, 2022).

⁶ Of course, if the rules change within Baptists Together, there is nothing stopping this person retaining their sense of vocation to remain celibate, though I fully appreciate that their sense of this becomes fraught with difficulty and “temptation” if they are in a denomination that purports they do not need to remain like this.

would be concerned that their desire to ‘flee from sexual immorality’⁷ would be undermined, placing their discipleship and allegiance to Christ at risk. I respect that (for them) their own discernment regarding discipleship to Christ would be incompatible with an amended stance of our movement, and so they would leave Baptists Together if the current rules were to be changed.

Conversely, I have a friend who is earnestly hoping for the MR rules to be changed, so that they can joyfully enjoy a committed marital relationship with someone of the same sex and have a recognized, covenantal union in this particular manner, alongside (and within) their existing vocation as a Baptist minister. Currently, they do not want to come out because they feel unsafe to do so within the Baptist family, as it currently stands. I am also aware that there are other people who are married to someone of the same sex, but who are unable to have their sense of (corporately discerned) calling recognised within the institutional boundaries we currently uphold.

Whilst all these people feel unsafe at the prospect of different parameters for our institution,⁸ the very prospects of what would make them feel unsafe are different, diametrically opposed even. I have been in the universal Church long enough to realise that such a dream of just agreeing to disagree can rarely be achieved and can sometimes be a naïve evasion of taking a stance, often at the expense of the more vulnerable. More seriously, for someone like me to just shake my head at those who cannot simply agree to disagree may unwittingly compound the pain and hurt that is experienced by others for whom this issue is not merely theoretical, but personal, visceral, and has real, not just concrete, but again, salvific implications.⁹

⁷ 1 Cor 6:18.

⁸ This issue surely highlights that we are indeed an institution, and not a ‘movement’ as some prefer to say. Framing our Union using either term engenders different postures by which we navigate our MR rules, both in terms of our history and our relationships. Whether the rules “move” or not, they are institutional, and therefore concrete and systemically binding, for good or ill.

⁹ When I use the term, ‘salvific,’ I am appealing broadly to the influences upon my own thinking that have amalgamated together in what I hope is a holistic and faithful approach to the liberating work of God in Christ. These influences include the Reformed theologian, Karl Barth, the Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Black liberation theologians, James Cone and Anthony G. Reddie, the scholastic Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, the (Baptist) Old Testament scholar, Helen Paynter, the New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, and more recently, the womanist theologian, Kelly Brown Douglas. In the last eight years however, my paradigm has undergone extensive broadening and sharpening under the thought of the Black Baptist theologian, Willie James Jennings. I share all this in the hope that my use of the term, intentional as it is, does not become reduced to the reader’s own thinking, but I also hope they might recognise where my own awareness is lacking and incomplete.

That said, whilst I recognise that this is a necessary discussion for all of us to engage in, I wonder whether the very predicament we are faced with is an opportunity for us to recognise a deeper theological grounding for what it means to be Christians, and more specifically, Baptists together. What I will present is not intended to posit an opinion either for or against the proposed changes to our MR rules. That would be premature and I am quite honestly wrestling with this live issue with all its contentious perspectives. However, nor am I advocating that we try to celebrate a vague, pseudo-Baptist notion of unity in difference in a conceptually abstract way over this issue. Such a paradigm, when pushed to the spatiotemporal extremes, is full of contradictions, and cannot stand in and of itself without potentially marginalising someone. Attempts at a solution that somehow (and quite imaginatively) overcome the impasse between the conservative/liberal or radical/progressive divides will leave some people marginalised, confused, and feeling unsafe.¹⁰ Nor do I seek to convince us that we should try and transcend our differences and thereby avoid having to consider what we believe concretely in an ethical sense. To quote one of our college principals, ‘There are times when you can’t not make a decision.’¹¹ People within this union of churches are currently affiliated, whether we like it or not, to a certain viewpoint that has held prevalence. Whether actively or passively, we are aligned to a particular vision, and we must bear in mind that deciding not to decide is to decide, albeit passively.¹² Rather than trying to make a case for what is good, right and true for this debate, my intention here is, I think, lowlier, rudimentary, and more important.

In this article, I will try to make a case to simply argue that, whichever view we hold regarding SSM, we can say with integrity that we are disciples of Jesus Christ, and that others who hold a different view can be as well. In fact, I think we have an opportunity within the midst of this feeling of painful disunity to witness a form of spiritual unity that is deeper than any conceptual theological ethic with which we might fly our flag, or put our stamp. *I believe that whatever view people take, they can nevertheless become disciples of Jesus, and therefore, a part of his*

¹⁰ I do not have space here to discuss what it means for a person to “feel unsafe” but I simply acknowledge that it is far more complex a phenomenon than what an individual themselves can self-constitute epistemologically.

¹¹ Steve Finamore, Principal of Bristol Baptist College, rightly made this point within a discussion on biblical hermeneutics within a new resource on equality and diversity created by Baptists Together, entitled ‘I am because you are.’ His point is clear in reference to this topic. We either change the rules, or we do not. Given the language that was adopted in the past with the particularity of appropriate sex in mind, those are the options we have given ourselves now.

¹² *DBWE* 12, 165; *DBWE* 13, 256. Thomas Aquinas (I-II, Q71 A5) makes a similar point in reference to James 4:17, suggesting that not acting or taking a stance does not necessarily protect us from sinning, because ‘sin can also be without act.’ See *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), 900.

body. Conversely, I believe that the views people take do not necessarily make them disciples of Jesus, nor a part of his body. What I am trying to say is that, pragmatics notwithstanding, I do not regard this issue as a litmus test for faithfulness and discipleship to Christ per se. There remains the question of what way we are called to go together (or not together), and some of us may fall short in obeying Christ's concrete call, but that does not mean that I should be excluded from the Lord's table alongside others who disagree with me. As King questioned *who* the White American churches worshipped, this process (and not just the outcome) may reveal *who* we worship as Baptists Together. You may already agree with my claim; in which case, you are welcome to finish reading at this juncture. I have written this for anyone whose perspective is such that one cannot be a Christian if they hold a certain view. Whilst we cannot avoid a concrete, institutional line for these MR rules, I hope my essay might give hope to some of us who are concerned about our witness to Jesus Christ, who, through his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, reconciles humanity to God, to others, and to this world. I believe that our struggle and conflict over this issue might enable us to embody a faith that is in Christ alone, who *binds us together, not despite, but precisely within the very midst of our disparate viewpoints and postures*. On a more basic level, I hope it might ground us in humility within the midst of our different conversational spaces, so as not to demonise others or reject them as either Pharisees or apostates.

To construct my case, I will draw on the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose insights have been helpful in many ways. It is not lost on me that Bonhoeffer has been easily co-opted to serve the theological agendas of many competing voices. To quote Craig Gardiner, 'It is a lot easier to plunder Bonhoeffer for material than, say, Karl Barth.'¹³ This is maybe a problem with Bonhoeffer, or it could be a sign that his work, in contrast to someone like Barth, was unapologetically contextual, and therefore, though sadly, all too easy to misunderstand and misconstrued for ideological ends. Bonhoeffer wrote his first doctoral thesis on a theological sociality of the church, which was later published as *Sanctorum Communio*.¹⁴

¹³ Craig was really helpful during the initial stages of my PhD thesis, when I was considering whether to focus on Bonhoeffer or Barth for my studies on lament.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 1, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Kraus and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), henceforth *DBWE* 1. Additional references to *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. and Barbara Wojhoski, 17 vols (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996–2014), will be indicated by *DBWE*. I drew on this work during my own PhD studies, Tim Judson, *Awake With Christ in Gethsemane: Lament and Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2023), and some of the key themes he presents can be traced through his writing, right up to his last years in prison. *Sanctorum Communio* (*SC*) covers topics such as personhood, individuality, community, sin, soteriology, Christology, solidarity, and the essence of faith.

As stated above, I do not intend to solve the problem we face within this comparatively short discussion. However, I hope to convince some readers towards what I think is a radically orthodox form of faith in Christ, which is faithful to our Baptist roots, and which might ground us all within the *struggle* of this debate, as a conduit for Christian existence, and not (necessarily) an obstacle. Our solidarity as Baptists Together may actually be, Christologically speaking, far more disarming and discomfiting than any of us would choose in and of ourselves, and may position us all within this discussion with a renewed mind.

Creaturely Conflict and Sinful Inhumanity

Something that comes through very strongly in Bonhoeffer's writing is the creaturely nature of human being.¹⁵ None of us are the *creator*; we are the *created*. None of us are *infinite*, but *finite*. None of us are unlimited, either epistemologically, ontologically, spatially, temporally or however we might construe humanness. To be human means that we are not divine. This is not bad, providing that we embrace the gift of our existence as fallibly free human creatures. The thing about being human is that we rub shoulders with other finite human creatures in the world, in complex and dynamically contingent ways. To be truly human means that my life is continually opened to reality afresh. What is 'real' takes hold of me within my creaturely life and forms me in itself, rather than me forming a notion of reality within myself. To deny my limitations, my interdependence, and my need, would be to shirk the humanity that God has graciously given me, as a life-giving gift bestowed through relationship with both him, others, and the world. The spatiotemporal difference between you and I is something that God has crafted, so that we might flourish distinctly and deliberately alongside one another, rubbing shoulders in sharing our life together.

Inevitably, our creaturely existence, with the limitations and concomitant differences between us, constitutes an ontological distinctiveness between our individual humannesses. The particularity of the space we each inhabit with our creaturely bodies engenders conflict. This type of conflict does not necessarily have to be bad or sinful. Indeed, our creaturely differences (should) remind us of our mutual need for one another in our limitations and unique spatiotemporal particularities. Apart from sin, conflict is good. It is a necessary aspect of life that prompts humanity to embrace the freedom of their limitations. Indeed, before sin, conflict offered a boundary that constituted

¹⁵ For the best example, see *Creation and Fall* in DBWE 3.

creaturely freedom and mutual flourishing.¹⁶ If I recognise you in your distinct space, I will not impose upon you or coerce you into my space, because the conflict ensures we embrace one another for the healthy mutuality of our creatureliness. However, because of sin, ‘human beings have lost their creaturely nature.’¹⁷ Conflict which naturally arises amidst creaturely difference becomes distorted, and has destroyed the gift of simple, unmediated community between individuals and God, and with one another.¹⁸

It is worth pausing on what we mean by sin here, given its obvious implications for our current issue, and the varied ways it is used, which informs a related soteriological import. Martin Luther’s dictum of the *cor curvum in se* (the heart turned in on itself) provides a helpful orientation for Bonhoeffer’s hamartiology. I also think this encapsulates something of the heart of the matter in our discussion. In Eden, Adam and Eve seek to become like God, seek to be limitless and infinite, which is an inseparable turning away from creator, fellow creatures, and creation. Sin entails the ‘ontic inversion into the self, the *cor curvum in se*.’¹⁹ The integrity of their humanness, which resides in their free *relation, creatureliness* and *obedience*; in short, the *imago Dei* bestowed on humanity is rejected. We can interpret both the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to be biblically iconic/theological representations of how God fixes the necessary conditions for the *imago Dei*.²⁰ The commandment to refrain from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a spatiotemporal (i.e. creaturely) referent from which, through its obedience in relation to God, humanity encounters the centre and limit of its freedom ever anew.

Through eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve seek to become *sicut deus*, like God, which carries a simultaneous rejection of their humanness.²¹ They forsake and transgress the God-given conflict which would otherwise enable them to thrive alongside one another.²² It is *not* that they have merely broken a moral code. Whilst

¹⁶ *DBWE* 1, 84–86. Also, *DBWE* 3, 98–99. A doctrine of sin derived primarily from Genesis 3, and not from Christ, can be problematic. See John E. Colwell, *The Rhythm of Doctrine* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 68–69.

¹⁷ *DBWE* 3, 126.

¹⁸ *DBWE* 1, 63.

¹⁹ *DBWE* 2, 46.

²⁰ Joel Lawrence, ‘Death Together: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Becoming the Church for Others,’ in *Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture* edited by Keith L. Johnson and Timothy Larsen (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 117.

²¹ *DBWE* 3, 115–16. Also, *DBWE* 4, 282.

²² It should not be lost on us that there is a primordial conflict with creation itself, as a means of humanity’s living in freedom, which, once transgressed, leads to the destruction of creation by its creatures.

important, that does not remotely capture the gravitas and irreversible profundity of what they have done. Rather, they have staked a claim to be arbiters of morality itself, to be the judges of good and evil, to set the horizons and boundaries of truth.

He declares himself good, he declares himself bad, but whether good or bad, both declarations are merely attempts at least to be secured; but he does not recognize one thing, namely, his own guilt before God in his good and his evil, guilt consisting precisely in wanting to self-posit and self-secure himself once and for all.²³

Humanity have acted in a manner that irreversibly claims the role of constituting (in themselves) what it means to be (a good or evil) human. In so doing this, they have unwittingly elected for themselves, either the unbearable anxiety of deliberating over what is good, right, and true, or they have elected a self-justifying epistemological source from which they may appeal to this or that ethic, which is ultimately nothing more than the myopic vantage point of a self-righteous sinner. And the profound thing is that no one wants to admit that they are the one who has fundamentally turned inwards in this regard, having reduced God, the world and others to the epistemological mastery of the individual self.²⁴

I do not think we should read Genesis 3 in a hereditary, fatalistic sense, as though this passage somehow explains the problem of evil. Genesis 3 is just as much descriptive as prescriptive. The narrative is far too real for us to ignore that we are in that Garden too. We are Adam and Eve.²⁵ We are a people who

²³ *DBWE* 10, 401. Where possible, I have tried to make Bonhoeffer's language gender-inclusive, but in this instance, it would involve too many amendments to make it faithful to Bonhoeffer's emphasis here on the individual. That said, there is a necessary critique offered to nuance Bonhoeffer's thinking where his own imaginative horizons are limited. See Jennifer McBride, 'Bonhoeffer and Feminist Theologies,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 365–82; Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Lisa E. Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009); Chung Hyun Kyung, 'Dear Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Letter,' in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition*, edited by John W. De Gruchy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

²⁴ Gen 3:11–13.

²⁵ Though Bonhoeffer would also have us recognise ourselves in another garden too, with Jesus in Gethsemane, as he asks his disciples to stay awake with him. Barth makes the same point about the Fall and notions of "original sin." The notion that human sinfulness is biologically hereditary and therefore inevitable is not only theologically distorted and fatalistic, but oppressive and repulsive. In fact, it paints humanity as a tragic race that is not enslaved to sin, but created in

have brought and continue to bring such chaos, disorder, pain and suffering into this world because we are all seeking to be the judge of what is good and evil, however, piously, biblically, experientially, authentically, or faithfully we try. For humanity to try and be like God means nothing other than self-determined solitude, deriving the truth of God's Word in reference to its own conscience, which is sinful humanity's last attempt at control of God and the world.²⁶ 'The person gains command of the world by elevating [themselves] into a tragically isolated individual.'²⁷ By acquiescing in the objectivity posed by the serpent's question and advice, humanity rejects its imaged being, leaving it simultaneously divided and alone.²⁸

This is where we would do well to draw on a doctrinal necessity for the dialectical sociality of human personhood. A person is an *individual*, who lives in *relation to others*. They cannot be a person in isolation, and nor can they be a person if their individuality is dissolved into a collective. This structure ensures that the person is free, or to be blunt, truly human. The problem arises when a person rejects this structure of their human creatureliness. Sin effects an irreparable rupture and brokenness in human personhood.²⁹ The state, or rather, the human propensity to inhabit this introspective, self-deifying, pseudo-personhood, is referred to by Bonhoeffer as humanity 'in-Adam.' This is a designation for humanity that has elected its own isolation and cannot reverse it because of the unassailable perpetuity and piety of the *cor curvum in se*.³⁰ Sin is the self-elected enclosure within the self. This manifests itself in

robotic fashion to sin throughout history as a cosmically determined inevitability. Barth argues, 'there can be no doubt that the idea of a hereditary sin which has come to [people] man by propagation is an extremely unfortunate and mistaken one ... "Hereditary sin" has a hopelessly naturalistic, deterministic and even fatalistic ring.' Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 500, 501.

²⁶ *DBWE* 2, 158–59; *DBWE* 10, 406. Bonhoeffer also qualifies that conscience and the Lord direct our response to the state, *DBWE* 16, 517, though maintains that conscience is precarious if we are in Christ, precisely because we are not ultimately in our own conscience, *DBWE* 16, 265, which is the wisdom of human nothingness, *DBWE* 16, 487. See also *DBWE* 9, 463, 483.

²⁷ *DBWE* 10, 396.

²⁸ *DBWE* 3, 119–20, 122.

²⁹ *DBWE* 3, 66, 80. Also, Clifford Green, 'Human sociality and Christian community,' in *Cambridge Companion*, 118.

³⁰ Eva Harasta notes that the notion of sin 'aligns with [Bonhoeffer's] overall relational and soteriological framework' because it 'allows for integrating the specifically personal and social manner of human beings,' which 'expresses Bonhoeffer's relational ontology.' Eva Harasta, 'Adam in Christ? The Place of Sin in Christ-Reality,' in *Christ, Church and World*, 68. Tom Greggs argues that we should 'identify the ultimate foundational *res* of [Bonhoeffer's] theology as ecclesiology.' Tom Greggs, 'Bearing Sin in the Church,' 78. See also *DBWE* 1, 141. However, without a Christological prerequisite (i.e. Christ as its origin, mediator and goal, as per section 2.1), the church understands its existence in itself, leading to an ecclesial *cor curvum in se*. See *DB-FS*, 350–51. Greggs dogmatically highlights this danger. See Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 121–47.

numerous ways, but it is a helpful way of framing the individual worlds and stories that we all inhabit, and the continual struggle we face to live alongside those who are different, which includes the dynamics of Christian societies present with one another. Humanity ‘in-Adam’ lives in a paradoxical form of solidarity, whereby people exist together in absolute and mutual isolation from God and one another, as a disparate collective in solitary self-destruction.³¹ Sin is solidarity as isolated units, which is ultimately a solidarity that has no substance or life in it.³² Any claim of solidarity with others cannot exist in and of itself. We are so locked in our own self-orientation that we cannot achieve genuine liberation and communion together. Any claim to an embodied-ness with one another is a sinful illusion, deceptive, elusive, abusive, coercive and imposing to the detriment of some, or all of us.

New Humanity

In contrast to humanity in-Adam, Jesus Christ does not share in sinful human solidarity because *he is an altogether new humanity*. This God-human is not enticed into the introspective fallenness of finite humanity, but is free. As the one who is—not only bestowed with but actually *is*—the *imago Dei* on earth, Christ fully enters the misery of a broken world that lives under the sorrowful self-condemnation of bodies who have aborted from God and one another.³³

While the old humanity consists of countless isolated units—each one an Adam—that are perceived as a comprehensive unity only through each individual, the new humanity is entirely concentrated in ... Christ, and only in Christ is it perceived as a whole. Christ has a function that sheds the clearest light on the fundamental difference between Adam and Christ, namely *the function of vicarious representative* ... Adam’s action is extremely egocentric. That its effect closely resembles a deliberately vicarious representative action must not obscure the *entirely different basic premises*. In the old humanity the whole of humanity falls anew, so to speak, with every person who sins; in Christ, however, humanity has been brought once and for all—this is essential to *real* vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung]—into community with God ... *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

³¹ DBWE 1, 92. Also, DBWE 1, 117, and DBWE 6, 114, 125.

³² See DBWE 10, 396; DBWE 14, 733.

³³ DBWE 15, 361.

between Christ and human beings, but vicarious representative action is the life-principle of the new humanity. True, I know myself to be in a guilty solidarity with the other person, but my service to the other person springs from the life-principle of vicarious representative action.³⁴

This has radical implications for so much of church life in general. Solidarity in this strict-Christological sense,³⁵ means that we cannot relate or live alongside others in any manner other than as disparate, mutually isolated individuals. That is all that we have in common. That is our solidarity. We are a bunch of sinful hearts turned in on themselves. This sounds awfully bleak, but it is critical to understanding the radically different and new humanity that Christ represents for us all. Without Jesus, all we have in common is that we are self-referential. To caricature Bonhoeffer's thinking here, we are essentially egotistical because we (especially the powerful and privileged) are unable to avoid placing our own horizons (or world, or story, or experience, or metaphysical *a priori* etc.) at the centre, inadvertently foregrounding the self over God, others, and creation.³⁶ Humanity in-Adam reaches for those who are similar to it, with whom it can relate or comprehend, because it feels secure in what is familiar and graspable. With even the best intentions, sinful humanity *is* only open to others insofar as others can be utilised to exacerbate the individualistic world and story of what it means to be human within the sinful separatedness of us all. In direct contrast, Christ's person and work is a genuine break with the continuous battle of the *cor curvum in se*, not solidarity, but *vicarious representative action* (*Stellvertretung*). Andrew DeCort qualifies this dense term as 'Christ's willing initiative to *stand in our place on our behalf*, to be our representative and thus to take everything we had coming to us and to give us all that he is as our own.'³⁷ To summarise, 'Christ reveals himself to be "one for the other."³⁸

We can substantiate this point via a *theologia crucis*. The cross identifies each human individual in their self-focussed solitude. In the death of Christ, God reveals God's judgment regarding this form of human existence that humanity has elected for itself. To God, it only leads to death (broken relationships,

³⁴ *DBWE* 1, 146–47. See also *DBWE* 4, 219.

³⁵ I recognize that this is a take on "solidarity" that is uncommon.

³⁶ One of the huge problems of theology historically is that White modernist paradigms have failed to reckon with this, refusing to navigate the geography and peculiar existentiality of our horizons. Something that theologies from the global majority offer is that they recognise the unavoidable and important place for particularity and context guiding the thinking and practice of theology.

³⁷ Andrew DeCort, *Bonhoeffer's New Beginning: Ethics after Devastation* (Lanham: Lexington/Fortress, 2018), 106.

³⁸ DeCort, *Bonhoeffer's New Beginning*, 106.

shattering the limits and potential of our createdness etc.). At the cross, every individual is Adam/Eve. Each person stands alone before God.³⁹ The cross is the means through which God in Christ allows human self-righteousness to appear right, but through it, God justifies Godself and God's intention for human existence, thereby pronouncing or exposing humanity as a humanity both deceived and guilty.⁴⁰ The cross of Jesus identifies humanity in its solitude.⁴¹ However, 'In the resurrection of Jesus Christ his death is revealed as the death of death itself ... and the humanity-of-Adam has become the church of Christ.'⁴²

Humanity does not suddenly stop being sinful. Rather, it is precisely in its solidarity as a collective of individual sinners who are isolated from God and one another, that they witness God's vicarious self-isolation in Christ, as the overcoming of humanity in-Adam's individualism. Jesus is without sin, without any self-preferential treatment towards himself or his own epistemological introspection, and he steps into the isolation and bleak disarray of sinful human existence as the only one who is genuinely for others. In doing this, God (in Jesus) has borne and embodied the inhumanness of all sinful humanity. In real terms, the concrete presence of sin, suffering and sorrow remain, but they remain as those things which are now incontrovertibly judged and redeemed eschatologically in Christ.⁴³ Because we are so inclined towards abstractions (and even experience is often extremely abstract), the displacement of the old, Adamic humanity by Christ's new humanity happens in the context of time and space. Anything else is impossible to exist in genuine creatureliness. The revelation of this reality breaks into world history ever anew by the Holy Spirit to establish the new humanity, witnessed and witnessed to as the church.⁴⁴ Thus, 'Community with God exists only through Christ, but Christ is present only in his church-community, and therefore *community with God exists only in the church.*'⁴⁵ Whilst Christ and the church are not

³⁹ *DBWE* 1, 150.

⁴⁰ *DBWE* 12, 398; *DBWE* 14, 608–9. See also *DBWE* 10, 406; *DBWE* 11, 298.

⁴¹ I do not have space to explore this in terms of how Jesus interacts with the other two men alongside him, but it is worth pondering. I am also reminded of the way White and Black folks responded, largely in different ways, to the murder of George Floyd. 'Responsibility: A reflection on our responsibility as white Christians in a world where George Floyd was murdered,' *Baptists Together*, accessed 17 October 2022. <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/589057/Responsibility.aspx>.

⁴² *DBWE* 1, 151–52.

⁴³ *DBWE* 1, 142–43. Also *DBWE* 6, 92; *DBWE* 11, 300.

⁴⁴ *DBWE* 1, 144. Also *DBWE* 14, 455.

⁴⁵ *DBWE* 1, 158. For Bonhoeffer, 'A Christian who stays away from the assembly is a contradiction in terms.' *DBWE* 1, 227. This is because believers are never beyond needing to receive the gift of salvation anew. 'Thus they seek the assembly not merely out of gratitude for the

totally identical—because Christ has ascended to heaven and we still wait his return—being in Christ is synonymous with being in the church.⁴⁶ This is not to claim that the church has the monopoly on truth of the Gospel per se. Rather, the distinct nature of the church is one where a distinctly different community exists within this sociological space, one which is not constituted by a Christian ethic or common experience, but by the vicarious representative action of Jesus Christ, who has usurped our sinful self-isolation (which really is the beginning of ethics⁴⁷) in order to transmute our Adamic pseudo-humanity into his new and truly real (creaturely) humanity with God, others, and the world.

***Stellvertretung* over “Solidarity”**

Stellvertretung heals (in)humanity through utterly breaking with, and thereby remaking it into something genuinely new, ‘that is *constituted* by being gracefully welcomed and included “in Christ.”’⁴⁸ Christ’s *Stellvertretung* simultaneously overcomes sin and reconstitutes a new humanity founded by, guided by and directed towards Christ as its vicarious representative. But *how* does this happen? Christ is the only one who frees humanity-in-Adam *from* its enclosure within itself, and frees humanity *for* God and others, because Christ genuinely ‘is for others.’⁴⁹ God is free from any selfishness or sinful introspection (or ‘ontic inversion into the self’⁵⁰) and so God in God’s freedom is free for the creation that God has made. As the one who is without sin (the *cor curvum in se*), Jesus (and only Jesus) can vicariously embrace and represent the inhumanity of those who abandon him, entering their self-isolated space as the one who, as representative of a distinctly different form of human existence, is for them over and against their self-isolation, making them isolated no more. Tom Greggs notes, ‘This act of incorporation is salvific in that it frees human beings from their individualism, allowing them to discover a new identity in Christ and the community of the church.’⁵¹ To put it another way, Jesus enters the space of those who are locked in their own self-destructive space, revealing

gift they have already received, but are driven by the desire to receive it ever anew, to be born anew again and again.’ *DBWE* 1, 228. It would be ideal to trace this thinking, and its development over the course of Bonhoeffer’s writing, but space sadly does not permit it.

⁴⁶ *DBWE* 1, 140. See also Michael Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community: Bonhoeffer’s Ecclesiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 127–28.

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer considers ethics to be the result of humanity’s attempt to secure itself abstractly against God, even (apparently) in the name of God. See *Ethics*, *DBWE* 6 and also, *DBWE* 9, 267; *DBWE* 10, 365; *DBWE* 11, 167, 297–98; *DBWE* 12, 202, 210; *DBWE* 14, 471, 967; *DBWE* 16, 542, 555, 561.

⁴⁸ *Ethics*, *DBWE* 6, 107.

⁴⁹ See *DBWE* 8, 501.

⁵⁰ *DBWE* 2, 46.

⁵¹ Tom Greggs, ‘Ecclesiology,’ in *Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 235.

himself as for others who are unable to be anything other than for themselves, and refuses to be repulsed by them. Concretely, this means ‘it is from the other that the Christian learns who he or she is as a new human being.’⁵² Community is established by Christ alone, not on the individual’s ability to attach themselves to God or another through a self-constituted solidarity. Any such thing is unavoidably still about the self as it is based on the perceived purpose or utility that can be wrought from another individual to serve one’s own self-referential personhood. Jesus died for my sins, but that cannot be anything other than an arresting away from my sinful self-isolation.

Critically, this does not mean we should utterly reject notions of solidarity in a broader sense. In fact, there are numerous citations where Bonhoeffer endorses it and even deploys the term as a mark of Christian discipleship.⁵³ John de Gruchy even unites the two seemingly opposing terms by summarising Bonhoeffer’s vision for a church living in ‘vicarious solidarity with the world in its need.’⁵⁴ To get a sharper sense of how Bonhoeffer might help us here, it is worth observing a later comment in *Sanctorum Communio*, as he discusses where faith can perceive and experience the church most clearly. For him,

this certainly does not happen in communities that are based on romantic feelings of solidarity between kindred spirits. It rather takes place where there is no other link between the individuals than that of the community that exists with the church; where Jew and Greek, pietist and liberal, come into conflict, and nevertheless in unity confess their faith, come together to the Lord’s Table, and intercede for one another in prayer.⁵⁵

Societies and communities of people are generally (and quite naturally) established and maintained through the dynamics of shared experience, cultural norms, or feelings of likemindedness (moral, economic, tribal and so on). During the October 2022 Baptist Union Council, Lynn Green stated, ‘It struck me in preparing for this we get caught up in our differences ... But we don’t want to lose sight of all we agree on. There’s so much common

⁵² Greggs, ‘Ecclesiology,’ 235.

⁵³ Most notably in *DBWE* 6, 233; *DBWE* 10, 326, 530; *DBWE* 11, 329; *DBWE* 12, 198, 256–57, 262–63, 289; *DBWE* 13, 22, 56, 316; *DBWE* 14, 298, 491, 766; *DBWE* 15, 312, 426; *DBWE* 16, 365. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of *Stellvertretung* becomes more radical later on, which nuances the dialectic between being ‘in-Adam’ and ‘in-Christ.’ See Harasta, ‘Adam in Christ?’ 74.

⁵⁴ John W. De Gruchy, ‘Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,’ in *DBWE* 8, 25.

⁵⁵ *DBWE* 1, 281. Bonhoeffer also argues it is ‘extremely dangerous to confuse community romanticism with the community of saints.’ *DBWE* 1, 278.

ground.⁵⁶ This is a legitimate approach to take, and I appreciate the General Secretary is in a different position to myself, with a pressing concern to maintain unity in a pragmatic and expedient sense throughout the forthcoming process. Yet, we could also look at it in a different way. Maybe we do not need to get caught up in our differences at all. Instead, perhaps rather than seeing our differences as problematic, they could be the conduit through which we find a deeper form of authentic community in Christ, which is not built at all upon our own sense of likemindedness or apparent ‘common ground.’ Furthermore, an unmediated form of solidarity (which some could glean from Green’s approach) cannot ultimately overcome our human isolation, and cannot reconcile individuals to God or to one another. Whilst experiential connection may seem healthy on one plane, and is an accidental (in the philosophical sense) inevitability of creaturely life, it could deceive individuals into the illusion of pseudo-community, such that the collective only really exists for itself, for its tribe, perpetuating its egotism by refusing to believe in Christ’s overcoming of their mutual isolation. In such instances, the church (or denomination) exists for itself and its own piety, rather than the Lord Jesus, who is only embodied when we confess our inability to embody him ourselves.

From my perspective, any church community which attempts to nurture or maintain a sense of togetherness in itself may well be ignoring the ever-new revelation of God in Christ. Instead, the structure of Christian solidarity, to use a somewhat clunky phrase, is realised by Christ’s *Stellvertretung*, whereby he bears the entirety of human isolation, sin and suffering upon himself. Christ’s experience on the cross is not something humanity can grasp at through its own solidarity, and thereby revert towards itself. Christ is vicarious, acting apart from others, as the means of arresting humanity ‘in-Adam’ from itself, for a new life reconstituted in the form of *Stellvertretung*.⁵⁷ As such, the church perpetuates its isolation and ontological sinfulness by ignoring this very state as a collective of solitary individuals, and as a result, the boundaries which would protect individuals against themselves and others become assaulted in the name of solidarity. The anxiety that drives us to appeal to what we have in common can unintentionally form a basis for community that is at best provisional, at worst, imperialistic. Joel Lawrence summarises, ‘Relationships that don’t recognize the mediating presence of Christ become relationships of power in which the other is used for the sake of the self.’⁵⁸ Confessing sinful

⁵⁶ ‘Baptist Union Council: October 2022,’ *Baptists Together*, accessed 25 October 2022. <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/Article.aspx?ID=645846>.

⁵⁷ See *DBWE* 6, 258–59.

⁵⁸ Lawrence, *Bonhoeffer*, 42.

self-isolation is the ‘concrete discipline that is essential for the community who would move from the *cor curvum in se* to being with others.’⁵⁹

Perhaps lamenting this painful situation together might be a more faithful witness to the Gospel than anything we have done thus far. I do not mean to diminish the important efforts towards peace-making and generating greater understanding between people. However, the difficult thing is that we sometimes will never agree with others, no matter how well we understand, or how well we try to be understood. What do we do then? Do we go our separate ways and assume Christ is not present amongst us? Rather, I think our response should be to come together in the hurt and dissonance, confessing the pain and sorrow this is causing us all, acknowledging our frailty and the divisiveness that we cannot overcome in ourselves. Even in Christ, that division will sometimes remain, but rather than synthesising into a magisterial theology, all we can do sometimes is confess that we cannot get there together. I cannot make you think and feel like me, and you cannot get me to embrace your space. Yet we do not have to remain utterly disparate and despondent. As we mourn and lament together that our union is fractured and feeble, the Spirit knits us together in our shared grief, a strange mercy that bleeds through our darkness and illuminates us all as the body of Christ.

Being Christian and Becoming Truly Human

Bonhoeffer would agree that we should have no time for utopian or pure ideals of the church, because it is a *divine* reality. ‘Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.’⁶⁰ Those who separate themselves from other believers reject the grace of God that confronts individuals concretely through other believers in Christ’s beautiful and broken body. ‘The reality of the church is understood not in moments of spiritual exaltation, but within the routine and pains of daily life, and within the context of ordinary worship. Everything else merely obscures the actual state of affairs.’⁶¹ ‘By sheer grace God will not permit us to live in a dream world even for a few weeks and to abandon ourselves to those blissful experiences and exalted moods that sweep over us like a wave of rapture. For God is not a

⁵⁹ Lawrence, ‘Death Together’, 121. Lawrence explains that failure to acknowledge (or lament) their being ‘in-Adam’ means ‘There may be mutual associations, there may be warmth, there may even be moral acts of service that help others, but there is no true being for others.’ Lawrence, ‘Death Together’, 124.

⁶⁰ *DBWE* 5, 36.

⁶¹ *DBWE* 1, 281. Also, *DBWE* 5, 47.

God of emotionalism, but the God of truth.⁶² Accepting that *our own* thoughts or words or deeds cannot bind us is an alarming and disarming claim. We are the body of Christ ‘only by that one word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.’⁶³ Of course, we may be working towards this as a union, but we must be attentive to the temptation to reduce our unity in the Spirit to a mere idea of unity. God is not our thoughts about God, but confronts us in this crucible within which we struggle together.

Bonhoeffer is not being categorically inclusive here. Absolutely not! Those who refuse fellowship with others in the name of Christ separate themselves from Christ. What is different about Bonhoeffer’s context is that the lordship of Christ became subordinate to the *Volk* (people) of a German nation, which legitimised the exclusion of Jews from the church. We risk misappropriating Bonhoeffer here if we clumsily translate his context into this current debate. The German Christians ultimately excluded *themselves* from Christ’s body, despite that they thought they were merely excluding *Jews* from the church.

In recognising that we cannot achieve an ideal form of solidarity—which is forever imprisoned in an egotistical echo chamber—believers are called to embrace a new form of solidarity that binds them together only as reconciled sinners. On this basis, the community ‘begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it,’ and can encounter a form of community mediated by Christ.⁶⁴

In contrast to other Germans, who found a shared solidarity in their sense of identity as a *Volk*, Bonhoeffer based his solidarity with the Jews not on his own shared experience with them, but on Christ’s *Stellvertretung*.⁶⁵ Christ’s mediating relationship ultimately frees believers from concerns over whether they feel or relate to the one whom they are called to love. Rather, Christian love (through Christ’s *Stellvertretung*) is free from the abstract ideals or egotistical attempts towards epistemological dominion over the other, and is therefore free for a genuinely spiritual and truly human form of love mediated by Christ for a distinctly different other.⁶⁶ Without this, ‘everything that is originally and solely characteristic of the community mediated through Christ

⁶² *DBWE* 5, 35.

⁶³ *DBWE* 5, 36–37. Reggie Williams summarises that for Bonhoeffer, ‘idealized humanity was an obstacle to encounters with the incarnate Christ, and thus to real Christian community’, Reggie L. Williams, ‘Bonhoeffer and Race,’ in *Oxford Handbook*, 383.

⁶⁴ *DBWE* 5, 35.

⁶⁵ See *DBWE* 14, 491. By recognising solidarity with others in this mediated way, Bonhoeffer anticipates a deeper relationship with others because it is based on what is ‘real’ in accordance with Christ. See *DB-RW*, 79.

⁶⁶ See *DBWE* 15, 426. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:26.

reappears in the nonmediated community of souls in a distorted form.⁶⁷ Love may appear selfless when mustered from within the self, and may involve the most striking of sacrifices, but in a form that is nevertheless a covert mode of *selfish* self-love.⁶⁸

Self-centred love loves the other for the sake of itself; spiritual love loves the other for the sake of Christ. That is why self-centred love seeks direct contact with other persons ... It wants to do everything it can to win and conquer; it puts pressure on the other person. It desires to be irresistible, to dominate.⁶⁹

With Bonhoeffer, I am attempting to articulate a grammar for relationships which is peculiar to Christian faith, and is upholding the dignity and particular difference of others that constitute the reality of being human in the world together. Christ establishes and mediates the boundaries between human persons, binding them together through his own vicarious representative action, not through cultural norms or abstract ideals, and this safeguards the vulnerable or supposedly weak (or outnumbered) from the assault of dominant others, however well-meaning the love of others might be in trying to love them. When someone is suffering in some way, it is not as faithful as we might think to offer advice or comfort from within our epistemological world. When that happens, all we witness is that Job's friends are alive and well. We should be cautious of initiating love from within our own unmediated self-reference (which is always limited and potentially imposing or coercive). It is less violent and abstract to be present with a person by accepting them as a distinct 'I' who is different to the 'You' that I determine them to be from within myself. To put it differently, others are who they are in reference to Christ, not in direct reference to me, and we witness that under God's word and at the Lord's table, where our relationship and community is mediated to us in the disparate nature of our inability to immediately relate.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *DBWE* 5, 41.

⁶⁸ Cf. 1 Cor. 13:2–3. Of course, not all self-love is selfish. Those who think it egotistical to cultivate rest and leisure and to look after oneself may do well to consider Bonhoeffer's thoughts to his friend, Eberhard Bethge. 'I believe that a great deal of the exhaustion and sterility in our ranks [of ministers] is rooted in the lack of "selfless self-love."' Since this topic has no place in the official Protestant ethic, we arrogantly disregard it and become work obsessed, to the detriment of the individual and of the whole.' *DBWE* 16, 78.

⁶⁹ *DBWE* 5, 42.

⁷⁰ As I have stated, any sense of immediacy in our relationship is an illusion anyway.

Context: Human Sexuality and “Christian Solidarity”

Perhaps some of the discourse in our life together as Baptists has intended, with the very sincerest of intentions, to have been shared “in love,” but in a manner of love which is at times self-centred, refusing to acknowledge Christ as mediator between us all. We have wanted to be at the centre, when the tree of life is at the centre. Maybe our unity has often been built on notions of common ground, or doctrines that are erected from within our tribe (be it evangelical or liberal or conservative or whatever). To be in Christ means that we are dynamically saved from the tribalism that would offer us the comfort of sinful solidarity “in the name of Jesus,”⁷¹ and instead, salvation is offered within a community with whom I have nothing in common other than Jesus, who is our sole and absolute authority, as we read in the Scriptures and claim in the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle.⁷² Christ is the one who constantly arrests from us our own “truth” regarding sin, salvation, and true humanness, lest these doctrines and ethical concepts become a false witness.

The faithfulness of Christian theology, liturgy and ethics is incontrovertibly a witness to and confession of the universal lordship of Jesus Christ. I imagine and hope that such a notion might not seem controversial, but it becomes complex when the church is faced with the concrete challenges arising regarding the mode and context of its proclamation in the contingencies and complexities of social and political life. During the Third Reich, the German state ordered churches to ostracise Jews from their congregations. Bonhoeffer regarded this as a *status confessionis*, that is, ‘a confessional situation in which for the sake of the confession to Christ there was only one position that is in accordance with the confession to Christ.’⁷³ In his mind, excluding Jewish believers from the fellowship and protection of the Christian community was apostasy. Any church that incorporated the Aryan paragraph (i.e. excluding Jews) would no longer be the church of Christ!⁷⁴

Today, within conversations I have had with ministers from different perspectives, it would seem clear that some in Baptists Together are calling for

⁷¹ This gives a slightly different angle to Gal. 3:27–28.

⁷² The first clause of particularly pertinent, which states, ‘That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.’

⁷³ Christiane Tietz, *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Translated by Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 39.

⁷⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–33, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12. Edited Larry L. Rasmussen. Translated by Isabel Best, David Higgins and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 167.

a *status confessionis* over this issue regarding the ministerial recognition rules on same-sex marriage.⁷⁵ Some of us, and some of our churches, are withdrawing from fellowship with, or are declining to participate in mission with Baptists who hold a different view. I have heard of this situation from within both ends of the debate. We are becoming mutually isolated from one another. Recalling the desire to ensure that my different friends do not feel unsafe, I appreciate (as best I can within my limited horizons) the gravitas of this issue in a pastoral sense. However, I am wary of us appropriating the Nazi situation to our own, from either an affirming or non-affirming end. I do not personally think that we are in a ‘Bonhoeffer moment’ as some popular representatives are inclined to suggest.⁷⁶ The challenges facing us today are not new, and the church has continually found itself becoming divided over the latest issue of the day.⁷⁷ Our hermeneutical horizons are (often unwittingly) constituted by the culture, state, or ground that we inhabit. So often, the confines and opportunities of our freedom are granted to us, not by the Gospel of Christ, but by the world, and this forces upon us the kind of juxtapositions such as we are facing now, urging us to pick a side. But ‘The freedom of the church is not where it has possibilities, but only where the gospel is truly effective in its own power to create space for itself on earth, even and especially when there are no such possibilities for the church.’⁷⁸ Of course, we need to make a decision about the MR rules, but if the source of the decision is located in a goal for resolution, rather than in Christ, our discussion may find itself on sinking sand, because Christ is before over, under and after any human resolution. I do not mean to sound overly mystical or aloof, I merely think this is a moment in our life together to be prophetic, and maybe, simply, to truly be the church.

For so many of us, we are wondering how to be faithful in the midst of this painful ordeal. We have our own viewpoint, but we are not quite sure how strongly to hold onto it. Should we nail our colours to the mast and be willing to go down with the ship that carries our principles? Maybe that ship might take us elsewhere, away from others that we have journeyed with until now.

⁷⁵ On a more extreme level, this can have devastating ramifications, as Bonhoeffer’s own life demonstrates. When the German state ordered churches to ostracise Jews from their congregations, Bonhoeffer regarded it as a *status confessionis*. See Keith Clements, ‘Bonhoeffer and Ecumenism’ in *Oxford Handbook*, 81–82. See also *DBWE* 14, 676; *DB-CT*, 40.

⁷⁶ See Clifford Green, ‘Hijacking Bonhoeffer,’ *The Christian Century*, accessed 25 October 2022. <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2010-09/hijacking-bonhoeffer>; Reggie L. Williams, ‘Harlem’s Influence on Bonhoeffer Underestimated in “Strange Glory,”’ *Sojourners*, accessed 25 October 2022. <https://sojo.net/articles/harlems-influence-bonhoeffer-underestimated-strange-glory>.

⁷⁷ The Downgrade controversy springs to mind as a key moment in Baptist history, though I continue to maintain that the paradigm shift for early Jewish believers was far more overwhelming than either Downgrade, or this current situation.

⁷⁸ *DBWE* 15, 448–49.

One thing the church has been really good at over the years is falling out, and surveying Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology gives a bit more explanation as to why, because we are all unfaithful. As I said in my introduction, I do not want to offer a particular view here on which choice we should make for the MR rules. That is because, for me, a deeper, more life-threatening issue, is that we are forcing a dichotomy that jeopardises the heart of being the church. Faithfulness to Christ requires our common confession of him alone. Of course, we have different ways that we understand that, but an essential recognition of his absolute lordship is *all* that we need to bind us together (which ironically, is *all-encompassing of all* who declare this). That is why I get nervous when people qualify whether they are an affirming or non-affirming church, because, whilst it may help practically, it communicates something that undermines our proclamation of Christ's totality. We will not find this easy, and we should not be surprised if we struggle to let go of our preconceived assumptions. At times our unity in Christ alone will feel thin, weak, maybe even barely distinguishable. But our (Christian) community is not based on a regimental togetherness, collective common ground, a graspable *modus operandi* or a strong "feeling" of unity, nor a clear demarcation (at this present age at least) of who is a sheep or goat, a prophet or a wolf in sheep's clothing.⁷⁹ Our faith in Christ does not depend primarily or constitutively on our ability to create our own boundaries, deceptive and nice and secure as they may feel sometimes. To use an earlier quote of Bonhoeffer's, true faith in Christ

does not happen in communities that are based on romantic feelings of solidarity between kindred spirits. It rather takes place where there is no other link between the individuals than that of the community that exists with the church; where Jew and Greek, pietist and liberal, come into conflict, and nevertheless in unity confess their faith, come together to the Lord's Table, and intercede for one another in prayer.⁸⁰

John Colwell foregrounds the Lord's Supper as 'the central celebration of the Church's life and essence, given as a sign and focus of its unity,' which, ironically, 'has become the principal sign and expression of its division.'⁸¹ Is it not tragic, and yet also a clue for us here and now, that we are divided over things that could be the most profound source of our unity. If we were to

⁷⁹ A sobering thought is that a wolf in sheep's clothing will see a sheep when they gaze in their own reflection!

⁸⁰ *DBWE* 1, 281. Bonhoeffer also argues it is 'extremely dangerous to confuse community romanticism with the community of saints.' *DBWE* 1, 278.

⁸¹ John E. Colwell, *Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 176.

confess and let Jesus be lord over the church, lamenting our utter ineptitude to do this ourselves, we might relinquish control over what it means to be the body of Christ who are bound together under God's Word at the Lord's Table together.⁸² In short, the pain and anger, the conflict and rupturing that exists in our Baptist body, this is the raw material of resurrection. All of us are invited to the Lord's table, to confess our mutual isolation from God and one another. In the awkwardness, the frustration, the godly sorrow, the over confidence in our social or cultural traditions are judged as inadequate boundaries to separate us from the love of God in Christ. Some of us may indeed be apostate, having betrayed or deserted Christ (like all the disciples⁸³), and Jesus serves us all bread and wine. Our faith and fellowship are mediated to us. There are boundaries set, but not by any of us. Christ alone is the boundary, the origin, the mediator and the goal of our faith. The new humanity within which He has birthed us will require us to share His life alongside those who we, unfathomably, are called into fellowship with. Anything else is incomprehensible and a truly unbiblical envisioning of the Gospel.

As Baptists Together, who hold to the lordship of Christ, as we discern his way in the Scriptures, we are bound together within our mutual isolation, as a witness to the God who, through the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Jesus, overcomes that sinful solidarity, and is making all things new. Rather than fighting our own corners and arriving at a theological or ethical segregation, we should be genuine nonconformists, and refuse the inclination towards division and the heart turned in on itself. Yet, critically, as Bonhoeffer shows, we do not overcome our temptation to divide from within ourselves. We do not necessarily depend on our self-secured institutions of common ground. We overcome our sin by being overcome through Christ's vicarious representative action for and with us all. Thus, we are nothing other than 'pilgrims and companions, committed to the way of Christ, faithful to the call of Christ, discerning the mind of Christ, offering the welcome of Christ, growing in the likeness of Christ, engaging in the mission of Christ in the world that belongs to Christ.'⁸⁴ Anything else is inhumanity. We should not

⁸² 'The reality of Christ's presence at the Supper through the means of bread and wine may be received and appropriated by faith, but *this reality cannot ultimately be dependent upon faith; it is ultimately dependent upon the determination and promise of God.*' Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, 165, emphasis mine. Bonhoeffer claims, 'By his Word, God has bound himself to the sacrament, that is, Jesus Christ is one who is bound by the sacrament. The God-human Jesus Christ is wholly present in the sacrament.' *DBWE* 12, 319. He is not interested in *how* the presence of Christ in bread and wine happens, but *who* it is happening in and through. *DBWE* 12, 323.

⁸³ Mk 14:50.

⁸⁴ 'The Dream,' *The Order for Baptist Ministry*, accessed 16 October 2022. <https://www.orderforbaptistministry.co.uk/the-dream/>.

betray our moral or theological sensibilities as nonconformists, and yet there is arguably nothing more radically nonconformist today than resisting the polarisation of tribes, and instead, associating as a disparate group of isolated individuals witnessing to God's merciful judgment in Christ, who alone binds us together, instead of clinging to notions around commonality, spiritual like-mindedness, hermeneutical uniformity or ethico-cultural and moral hegemony. As I said, earlier, I do not intend to solve the predicament at hand regarding MR rules for our union. Rather, I want to encourage us all to look beyond our own horizons and recognise that Christ confronts us in those who are different, who are lined up on the other sides of the debate, and he calls us to repent and believe the good news.

Since this article was peer reviewed, I have participated in one of the regional listening days that was offered by the South West Baptist Association. I found this whole day, organised by James Henley and Chris Fry, to be deeply irenic and peaceful. I was struck by the sense many people had that it was okay to not have a fixed position on this issue. I was also struck that there were others there who had themselves settled in a point of view, but who really appreciated being able to convey that in a space that welcomed them. What made the day prophetic in my mind, was that we shared the Lord's Supper at the end. We had cried, we had listened, we had all spoken, and those who had felt attacked elsewhere went away conscious that they are a part of the body. May the Spirit of Christ guide us in unity, truth and love.

Note on Contributor

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Cover Image

Designed by Micky Munroe. The image is based on a painting that was for many years displayed in Helwys Hall, Regent’s Park College, Oxford and was designed by Henry Wheeler Robinson (College Principal, 1920-44), representing the five principles of Baptist life: faith, baptism, evangelism, fellowship and freedom. See H. Wheeler Robinson, ‘The Five Points of a Baptist’s Faith’ *Baptist Quarterly* 11.2-2 (January-April 1942), 4–14.