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THE SACRAMENT OF ETHICAL REALITY: DIETRICH BONHOEFFER ON ETHICS FOR CHRISTIAN CITIZENS*

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Reality is the sacrament of command.[1]
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, July 1932)

Abstract

The paper explicates Bonhoeffer's dense statement, made in a 1932 lecture, that 'Reality is the sacrament of [the ethical] command'. It begins with a summary of William T. Cavanaugh's rich description of the Eucharist as that act which makes the Church Christ's body, thereby constituting the true *res publica*. A comparison is drawn with Bonhoeffer's account of the sacramental foundation of the Church's public proclamation of God's ethical command. Bonhoeffer differs from Cavanaugh, I suggest, not only in his conviction that the Church speaks God's command penultimately and with humility, but in regarding the state as one of the means by which God acts within the penultimate to preserve creation.

In *Torture and Eucharist*[2] and in *Theopolitical Imagination*[3] William T. Cavanaugh presents a rich description of the Eucharist as that true

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1 'Die Wirklichkeit ist das Sakrament des Gebotes', in E. Amelung and C. Strohm (eds.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Ökumene Universität Pfarramt: 1931–1932*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* 11 (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1994), p. 334, hereafter *DBW* 11; taken from 'Zur theologischen Begründung der Weltbundarbeit', pp. 327–44; English translation in *No Rusty Swords* (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 153–69, hereafter *NRS*.

2 William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

3 William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T&T Clark, 2002).

sacrifice to God that makes the Church into Christ's body, thereby constituting (in Augustine's words) the true *res publica*. By this means, Cavanaugh challenges both the 'myth of the state' and the 'myth of civil society as free space' in which the Church is required to act as one player among many according to rules written and umpired by the state. Cavanaugh's positive proposal is therefore not to 'politicise the Eucharist, but to "Eucharistize" the world'.[4] In this paper I want to develop a comparison between Cavanaugh's[5] view of the relation between sacrament and public ethics and that suggested by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his 1932 lecture, 'Towards a Theological Foundation of the World Alliance' [for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches]. In this lecture, Bonhoeffer offers a self-consciously provisional account of the sacramental foundation of the Church's public ethics, an account he sums up in the dense phrase: 'reality is the sacrament of command'. Bonhoeffer's account differs from Cavanaugh's, I suggest, not only in his view that the Church speaks God's ethical command to the world penultimately and with humility, but in his Lutheran conviction that the state, far from being an anti-ecclesial 'public thing' always to be disdained, is one of the means by which God acts to preserve creation. In trying to make sense of what Bonhoeffer meant by stating that 'reality is the sacrament of command', I also propose, as an exegetical 'by-product', to display the coherence in Bonhoeffer's theology against persistent claims that a fundamental reorientation takes place between the theological ethics of *Discipleship* and *Ethics*.[6]

'Eucharistising' the World

Cavanaugh's *Torture and Eucharist*[7] is a theological study of the Catholic Church in Chile during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet

[4] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, p. 14.

[5] Structuring a paper in which a comparison is drawn between Cavanaugh's view and that of Bonhoeffer's lecture risks creating the impression of two loosely intersecting arguments in tension rather than of one coherent argument. I am persuaded to take the gamble involved on the basis that Bonhoeffer's context and theology are much more distant from our own than is generally realised and that, consequently, a certain hermeneutical effort is required to connect Bonhoeffer's theological ethics with contemporary discussion.

[6] The thesis that there are distinct working periods in Bonhoeffer's life and thought is presented most tendentiously by Hanfried Müller in *Von der Kirche zur Welt* (Hamburg: Herbert Reich Evangelischer Verlag, 1961) but is repeated in a diluted form by John Godsey who speaks of three phases of foundation, application and fragmentation, in *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: SCM Press, 1960) and by Eberhard Bethge, whose biography is subtitled 'Theologian, Christian, Man for his Times', rev. English edn (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000). André Dumas also acquiesces in the thesis, commenting that it is 'on the whole accurate'. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality* (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 70.

[7] For a helpful study of Cavanaugh's *Torture and Eucharist* and a complementary proposal concerning the role of worship in forming the Church as a moral community, see Samuel Wells's *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos

Ugarte from 1973–90. At the outset Cavanaugh warns that though his book might appear to be an exercise in relating liturgy to ethics, or liturgy to politics, he strongly resists describing his project in this way. For Cavanaugh, conceiving liturgy and ethics, or liturgy and politics, as separate activities that one must work hard to connect is to make a category error with disastrous consequences for the Church's service to the world. This is because the distinction between politics and religion is not one that was discovered by Enlightened thinkers determined to move beyond the wars of religion, but one invented in order to confine the Church to the margins. The Enlightenment creation of a political realm that excluded the body of Christ did not therefore so much solve the conflict of religion and politics as enact it. The problem with the idea that religion and politics are separate spheres of life that need to be connected is that it suggests that to enter the political is to leave the liturgical. Where liturgy must be 'applied' or made relevant to political life and ethics the separation of religion and politics remains intact. Exactly this error lay at the heart, Cavanaugh contends, of the response of the Catholic Bishops in the early period of Pinochet's rule. By claiming in the first two thirds of the Pinochet era that the Church was the 'soul of the nation', the Church acquiesced in its exclusion from the Chilean body politic. Against this view Cavanaugh maintains that the Eucharist is not a sign pointing to a more concrete political reality, but a sign that performs a distinctively Eucharistic political community capable of 'Eucharistizing' the world.

The key contrast at the centre of Cavanaugh's argument is between torture and Eucharist. Torture, Cavanaugh sets out to demonstrate, is not merely an assault on individual bodies or an infringement of their rights, but the enactment of a particular conception of society. In a crucial passage Cavanaugh lays out what it might mean to imagine torture as the manifestation of a society formed by an omnipotent state:

> Torture may be considered a kind of perverse liturgy, for in torture the body of the victim is the ritual site where the state's power is manifested in its most awesome form. Torture is liturgy — or, perhaps better said, 'anti-liturgy' — because it involves bodies and bodily movements in an enacted drama which both makes real the power of the state and constitutes an act of worship of that mysterious power … The liturgy of the torture room is a *disciplina arcani*,[8] a discipline of the secret, which is yet part of a larger state project which continues outside the torture chamber itself.[9]

Press, 2004) which argues that: 'For Christians the principal practice by which the moral imagination is formed, the principal form of discipleship training, is worship … Each aspect of worship represents a vital dimension of moral formation' (pp. 81–82).

[8] The phrase is a striking echo of Bonhoeffer's characterisation of Christian discipleship in the world come of age as an '*Arkandisziplin*'.

[9] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, p. 30.

It is essential to the 'liturgy of torture', Cavanaugh continues, that the victim takes on the role of enemy of the state. Pinochet's military coup justified itself on the basis that strong military rule was necessary to save Chile from the communist enemy within. But the coup itself met very little opposition, so enemies had to be created, and the means used was torture. The victims of torture were made to acknowledge their worthlessness and corruption. All that matters — family, friends, causes and values — is betrayed. Torture thus peels away what makes the victim human through the mechanism of pain. The Eucharist, Cavanaugh believes, 'is the church's "counter-politics" to the politics of torture'.[10] It is not a symbol from which we might draw political insight: it is the Church's physical alternative to state terror. At the Eucharist the believer finds forgiveness. All that matters, family, friends, causes and values, are affirmed, strengthened and connected. The Eucharist makes us fully human as the Kingdom interrupts time to confuse the spiritual and the temporal. The Eucharist, Cavanaugh concludes, anticipates the realisation of a new society, a new politics.

The practical outworking of Cavanaugh's view of the political character of liturgy is expressed in an example of how Christians in Chile during the Pinochet era created 'spaces of resistance where bodies belong to God, not to the state'.[11] Cavanaugh recalls the actions of the Sebastián Acevedo Movement, which used public ritual acts of solidarity outside sites of symbolic importance such as torture centres and courts. Banners would be unfurled by groups, often including clergy and members of religious orders, who would sing and recite litanies naming the state's crimes before the police arrived and arrested them. It is significant for Cavanaugh that these activities were termed liturgies, and they involved not simply a 'spiritual' action, but a physical reconfiguration of city space, for example as traffic was disrupted;[12] and it is equally significant that these liturgies were not sacramental, since it is important for Cavanaugh that the sacraments should not be instrumentalised.[13]

Cavanaugh's reflections on the Eucharist as a performance of a true *res publica* are further developed in the provocative essays of *Theopolitical Imagination*. 'The modern state', Cavanaugh claims, 'is best understood … as an alternative soteriology to that of the Church. Both soteriologies pursue peace and an end to division by the enactment of a social body' but the 'state body is a simulacrum, a false copy, of the

[10] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, p. 205.
[11] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, p. 275.
[12] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, pp. 273–75.
[13] In this respect Cavanaugh is similar to Bernd Wannenwetsch whose splendid *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) also maintains that worship has its own integrity of purpose, since 'the church does not have itself at its own disposal' (p. 2). In other respects Wannenwetsch, who is Lutheran, has more in common with Bonhoeffer, whom he indeed cites as an opponent of the 'triumphant progress of functionalism' (p. 24) in relating worship and ethics. This paper owes a debt to Wannenwetsch in the phrasing of its title.

Body of Christ'.[14] By 'state', Cavanaugh denotes that modern institution 'in which a centralised and abstract power holds a monopoly over physical coercion within a geographically defined territory'.[15] Within the state, religion 'is no longer a matter of certain bodily practices within the Body of Christ, but is limited to the realm of the "soul", and the body is handed over to the state'.[16] In contrast, Christ's body is an eschatological gathering that is neither an entirely worldly nor an entirely otherworldly event, but one which 'blurs the lines' between the temporal and the eternal, in which the Church interrupts the false politics of the earthly city.

Yet, though Cavanaugh asserts a blurring of some distinctions within the Church (temporal/eternal, earth/heaven) and vigorous resistance to others (public/private) his argument depends upon the maintenance of other sharp distinctions (state/Church, body of Christ/secular body, secular politics/theopolitics). This is particularly evident in the essay 'The Myth of Civil Society as Free Space', in which he strongly resists attempts to regard civil society as a space that is public without being political, in the sense of being under the direct control of the state. The construct 'civil society' has been regarded by some Christian social ethicists as a rather promising one, allowing the Church to exercise a public role without 'the Constantinian spectre of implication in state coercion'.[17] In contrast, Cavanaugh argues that the distinction of public and private is an instrument by which the state domesticates the Church:

> The great irony, then, is that in trying to arrange for the Church [i.e., by means of its participation in civil society] to influence 'the public', rather than simply be public, the public has reduced the Church to its own terms[18] … If the Church accedes to the role of a voluntary association of private citizens, however, it will lack the disciplinary resources to resist the State's *religare*, its practices of binding.[19]

It is evident from Cavanaugh's immersion in the history of the Catholic Church in Chile that he is well aware that the theological understanding he advances of the Church as the one true *res publica* is not one that is always performed in practice. He is just as aware as was Augustine that '[t]he church is a *corpus permixtum*, full of both saints and sinners', and elsewhere he expresses matters no more confidently than this, that in spite of its manifold earthly imperfections '[a]s the embodiment of God's politics, the church nevertheless muddles through'.[20] Nevertheless there

[14] Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, pp. 9–10.
[15] Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 10.
[16] Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 35.
[17] Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 53.
[18] Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 83.
[19] Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 85.
[20] William T. Cavanaugh, 'Church', in William Cavanaugh and Peter Scott (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 405.

is, in Cavanaugh, a marked impatience with the provisional and the penultimate, a disdain for the secular, and a strong desire to describe the Church in terms of its promised Eschatological perfection. Participation in both state and 'civil society' on their terms is regarded with a nearly Donatist distaste for the taint of the secular, and robust engagement with the world is advanced on terms integral to that one true public thing, the Eucharistic community that performs the body of Christ.

How does Bonhoeffer's claim that 'reality is the sacrament of command' stack up against Cavanaugh's aspiration to 'Eucharistize the world'? It is most unlikely that Bonhoeffer's position on the sacrament and politics is either entirely at one or entirely at odds with Cavanaugh's theopolitics, so it is important to be clear about the purpose of such a comparison. It is not my aim to critique Bonhoeffer from a more enlightened contemporary perspective; neither do I want to treat Bonhoeffer as a 'Church Father' whose views may be used to evaluate the orthodoxy of theological epigones. Bonhoeffer is a significant theologian whose life and thought belong to a rapidly receding past and his voice does not carry easily into contemporary theological conversation. The purpose of what follows is to enable a conversation between the living and the dead.

Towards a Theological Basis for the World Alliance [for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches][21]

In July 1932 the Nazi Party won 230 seats in the Reichstag elections, paving the way six months later for the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor. In this context, on 26 July 1932, Bonhoeffer (who shared a commitment to peace-building with Cavanaugh) gave a lecture to a youth conference on peace at Ciernohorské, Czechoslovakia, outlining a theological basis for the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches. The experience did not prove very satisfying for Bonhoeffer and in a letter to Erwin Sutz following the conference Bonhoeffer remarked: 'I have just returned … from a very mediocre conference, which once more makes me doubt the value of all this ecumenical work.'[22] Not only did Bonhoeffer's lecture take him well beyond the theme of the conference, his attempt to raise

[21] The World Alliance existed to promote 'mental and moral disarmament of the people in all countries'. Beginning early in the twentieth century its heyday coincided with the formation of the League of Nations, which it aimed to support. Between 1931–37 the World Alliance worked closely with the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work (in which, with Bishop George Bell, Bonhoeffer also participated) but did not join with that organisation when, from 1938, it shared in the process to form the World Council of Churches. Bonhoeffer's involvement in the World Alliance came through the encouragement of his Superintendent, Max Diestel, who was an enthusiastic supporter. For the history of the World Alliance see R. Rouse and S. C. Neill (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517–1948* (London: SPCK, 1954), pp. 515ff.

[22] See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 246–48; see also Bonhoeffer's letter to Sutz, *DBW* 11, pp. 99–102.

basic questions about the Church's public ethic apparently set him apart from the less critical approach of other conference delegates.

Bonhoeffer's lecture began with the stark judgement that 'there is still no theology of the ecumenical movement'. The ecumenical movement, he continued, like its constituent churches, is quite properly in the process of developing a new self-understanding, but the generation of a theology consistent with it lags far behind. Bonhoeffer's concern was that without a coherent theology of the Church's public role the ecumenical movement risked being at the whim of political trends. He seeks to nudge the process on by sketching a theology of the ecumenical movement capable of under-girding its common life and of providing a warrant for its public ethics. At stake for Bonhoeffer was a set of fundamental questions concerning the integrity of the Church's life of reconciliation and the consequences of that for its public action and witness:

> What is this Christianity which we always hear mentioned? Is it essentially the content of the Sermon on the Mount, or is it the message of the reconciliation in the cross and the resurrection of our Lord? What significance does the Sermon on the Mount have for our actions? And what is the significance of the message of the cross? What relationship do the forms of our modern life have to the Christian proclamation? What has the state, what has the economy, what has our social life to do with Christendom?[23]

Bonhoeffer's opening response was to assert that the Gospel of Jesus is not a Gospel for the Church or its members alone, but Good News for the world: 'The church as the one community of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is Lord of the world, has the commission to say his Word to the whole world. The territory of the one church of Christ is the whole world'.[24] The view that there are areas or spheres of life ordained by God and governed by their own laws over which Christ has no authority must vigorously be repudiated. This set of questions was pertinent for two reasons (though Bonhoeffer does not make them explicit). Firstly, in March 1932 Bonhoeffer had 'plunged' within days of its publication, into Emil Brunner's *Das Gebot und das Ordnungen*[25] in

[23] *NRS*, p. 155, translation slightly amended; *DBW* 11, p. 329: 'Was ist das Christentum, von dem wir da immer reden hören? Ist es im wesentlichen der Inhalt der Bergpredigt oder ist es die Botschaft von der Versöhnung in Kreuz und Auferstehung unseres Herrn? Was für eine Bedeutung hat die Bergpredigt für unser Handeln? und was für eine Bedeutung die Botschaft vom Kreuz? Wie verhalten sich die Gestalten unseres neuzeitlichen Lebens zu der christlichen Verkündigung? Was hat der Staat, was hat die Wirtschaft, was hat unser soziales Leben mit dem Christentum zu tun?'

[24] *NRS*, p. 157.

[25] English translation: Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1937). In *DBW* 11, p. 89, Bonhoeffer writes of reading *Das Gebot und das Ordnungen* to Erwin Sutz, who was working at the time under Brunner's supervision. This book was to be the focus of Barth's *Nein!* in the polemical exchange with his fellow Swiss in 1934 that effected an irreparable theological break between

which Brunner discussed several themes on which Bonhoeffer's lecture dwells, including the nature of the divine command, of reality, and the orders of creation. Brunner was suspicious of the tendency in Barth's theology to speak as though human reason is entirely overwhelmed by direct revelation, arguing instead that human reason, without direct revelation, had a limited capacity — albeit ultimately subject to Scripture — for knowing God.[26] Bonhoeffer can scarcely have had time properly to digest Brunner's substantial book, but already he seems to be edging away nervously from the view that the orders, including the order of the state, though created by God, may be spoken of as natural spheres of life with autonomous authority. The second reason that Bonhoeffer's lecture was pertinent was that in 1932 the nascent ecumenical movement — then as now — was agonised by the question of what authority the churches have in their common address to the world. Bonhoeffer's response was that the ecumenical Church speaks with the only authority the Church ever speaks with, namely 'the authority of the Christ living and present within it'.[27] In his 1927 doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer had argued that the holy community of the Church is not simply an aggregation of its members, since it exists in and through Christ, through whom the old Adam is renewed. The Church is not, he therefore concluded, the body of Christ in some representative or metaphorical sense but rather is Christ, present in bodily form in the world today. The Church, in the book's most arresting phrase, is 'Christ existing as church community'[28] and the word of the Church to the world is the word of Christ spoken with the same authority as words spoken during his earthly life.[29]

Bonhoeffer continues his lecture by asking 'how the church speaks its word?' Realising in practice the authority of the present Christ, he argues, demands rigorous attention to the reality of the one addressed. At the simplest level, attending to reality means addressing the world

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them. Barth returned to discussion of the 'orders of creation' in *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), pp. 19–23, where he contrasted Bonhoeffer's version of the orders in the *Mandatsbegriff* favourably with Brunner's while still detecting in Bonhoeffer 'a suggestion of North German patriarchalism'.

[26] I am indebted here to John McDowell for an illuminating discussion of Brunner's disagreement with Barth in 'Who Can Hope? Barth, Brunner and the Subject of Christian Hope', paper given at the Society for the Study of Theology, Dublin, 31 March 2005.

[27] *NRS*, p. 157.

[28] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 1, English edn, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 141, hereafter cited as *DBWE*.

[29] Bonhoeffer reiterates this point in chapter 10 of *Discipleship* in *DBWE* 4, eds. Geffrey Kelly and John Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), where he again asserts that 'For the first disciples the bodily community with Jesus did not mean anything different or anything more than what we have today', p. 213.

in the most concrete way possible by resisting the desire to preach timeless principles and by speaking always as if God is God to us today in this specific time, place and situation. Yet, even where facts are expertly grasped and opinions widely canvassed, the question of how concrete a particular ecclesial statement may be is not thereby theologically resolved. Following Luther, Bonhoeffer takes it to be axiomatic that the Word of the Church to the world has two forms: gospel and commandment. The theological problem must therefore be expressed in the following way: can the Church preach the commandment of God with the same certainty with which it preaches the Gospel of Christ? Can the Church speak authoritatively on ethical and political matters — he gives economic justice and war as examples — with the same certainty with which it says 'your sins are forgiven'? For an authentically authoritative proclamation of God's command it is simply not enough to say something like 'ideally there shouldn't be wars, but sometimes they are necessary' or 'ideally it is wrong for someone to be rich while someone else has nothing, but the Church can't make rules about personal property': the Church must say concretely 'fight this war' or 'don't fight this war', or 'give this bread to this man'. Bonhoeffer well understood the danger of assuming a God's eye view of moral issues, of speaking as if our human word is the Word of God. For this reason he insisted the Church must accept humbly that in proclaiming an ethical command as authoritatively as it proclaims the good news of reconciliation 'it is blaspheming the name of God, erring and sinning, but it may speak thus in the promise of the forgiveness of sins which applies to the church'.[30] If this remarkable sentence appeared in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* or prison papers, where it would not look out of place, it might be supposed to reflect a shift from an apparently 'purist pacifism' of Discipleship to an apparent 'pragmatic compromise' implicit in Bonhoeffer's involvement with the Resistance. Its appearance in his 1932 lecture to a peace conference only makes sense if there is considerable consistency in Bonhoeffer's moral view that taking responsibility incurs guilt. The insight is echoed in Bonhoeffer's poem 'Jonah', rich in autobiographical allusion, written in the autumn of 1944 as evidence implicating him in the plot finally came to light:

> Cast me away! My guilt must bear the wrath of God;
> The righteous shall not perish with the sinner![31]

In his argument so far Bonhoeffer has stated that the Church speaks God's command authoritatively; speaks it concretely (by taking reality seriously); and speaks it in final anticipation of God's forgiveness. Bonhoeffer next begins to put sacramental flesh on the bones of his argument:

[30] *NRS*, p. 160.
[31] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1971), p. 399.

> The guarantee of the validity of the proclamation of forgiveness of sins is the sacrament. Here the general saying 'Your sins are forgiven' is bound up with water, wine and bread; here it comes to its own particular form of concreteness, which is only understood as the concrete here and now of the word of God by those who hear it in faith. What the sacrament is for the preaching of the Gospel, the knowledge of firm reality is for the preaching of the command. Reality is the sacrament of command.[32]

Within this short passage Bonhoeffer makes three claims. His first claim takes the form of a theological premise: that the proclamation of forgiveness of sin is made concrete in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, which validate it. His second claim is to state that what the sacrament is for the preaching of the Gospel, knowledge of reality is for the preaching of the command. This leads to the 'concluding' claim that reality is the sacrament of [ethical] command. The 'problem' with Bonhoeffer's argument in this, its key phase, is that it is not immediately clear how the statement: 'what the sacrament is for the preaching of the Gospel, the knowledge of reality is for the preaching of command' forms a bridge from Bonhoeffer's premise — that the sacraments guarantee the validity of the proclamation of forgiveness — to his conclusion that reality is the sacrament of command. Why, for Bonhoeffer, do the sacraments 'merely' guarantee the validity of the proclamation of forgiveness: do not the sacraments (in keeping with Cavanaugh's view of them) perform forgiveness, enacting that which they sign?

We are led some way towards understanding what Bonhoeffer intends to convey by his ensuing commentary which embeds his central statement concerning the function of knowledge of reality in a theology of creation:

> Just as the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the only forms of the first created reality in this Age, and just as they are sacraments for the sake of their relationship to the original creation, so it is that the 'ethical sacrament' of reality is signed as a sacrament only insofar as this reality is itself wholly grounded in its relationship to the reality of creation. Again, just as the fallen world and fallen reality only exist in their relationship to the created world and created reality, so the commandment rests on the forgiveness of sin.[33]

[32] *NRS*, p. 160, translation amended. *DBW* 11, p. 334: 'Die Sicherung der Gültigkeit der Verkündigung der Süundenvergebung ist das Sakrament.Hier ist der allgemeine Satz: "Dir sind deine Sünden vergeben" gebunden an Wasser, Wein und Brot, hier kommt er zu der ihm eigentümlichen Konkretion, die als konkretes Hier und Jetzt des Wortes Gottes allein von dem glaubend Hörenden verstanden wird. Was für die Verkündigung des Evangeliums das Sakrament ist, das ist für die Verkündigung des Gebotes die Kenntnis der konkreten Wirklichkeit. *Die Wirklichkeit ist das Sakrament des Gebotes*' (Bonhoeffer's italics).

[33] *NRS*, p. 160, my translation: *DBW* 11, p. 334, 'Wie die Sakramente der Taufe und des Abendmahls die einzigen Gestalten der ersten Schöpfungswirklichkeit in diesem Äon sind und wie sie um dieser ihrer schöpfungsmäßigen Ursprünglichkeit willen

This lapidary formulation, unexpanded in the lecture, becomes the basis for Bonhoeffer's lectures in the University of Berlin in the winter semester of 1932, subsequently published as Creation and Fall.[34] In these lectures Bonhoeffer reflected upon God's preservation of His created order after the fall. Before the fall Adam and Eve lived in a state of simple obedience to the divine will. When they ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil they became, just as the serpent had promised, *sicut deus*, able to decide for themselves what is right and wrong. God's response to Adam and Eve issues as curse and promise: paradise is barred but God accompanies them on their way into the world. In this new dispensation 'the creator is now the preserver; the created world is now the fallen but preserved world'.[35] Creation is fallen, but God preserves the original creation within the fallen in what Bonhoeffer here terms 'orders of preservation' in which the original unity of reality in humanity's simple obedience to the divine will is preserved. In such orders, to use phraseology from the *Ethics*, humanity is able to live in one undivided reality rather than in its fallen state of life in two spheres. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Bonhoeffer is saying, constitute a time when, and location where, the bifurcation of creation into its original state and its fallen state is reconciled. They are, as he puts it, only sacraments because of their relation to creation before the fall; and fallen reality is only real insofar as it holds hidden within it the preserved order of original creation. By direct analogy, the (ethical) word spoken by the Church as God's command is validated by knowledge of the reality of the fallen world 'only insofar as this reality is itself wholly grounded in its relationship to the reality of creation'.

In the remainder of his 1932 lecture, Bonhoeffer turned to the practical question of 'how does the church know what God's commandment is today?' His two answers constitute a statement of theological intent that will occupy him from 1932 until his arrest in 1943. His first answer is that the Church recognises God's commandment in biblical law, including the Sermon on the Mount. This question would absorb his attention — allowing for digressions into Christology, the life of the Christian community and biblical exegesis — from this point until the publication of *Discipleship* in November 1937. His second answer is that the commandment is recognised in 'the orders of creation'. Expanding this claim was the second part of his agenda and would occupy him

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Sakramente sind, so ist das 'ethische Sakrament' die Wirklichkeit nur insofern als Sakrament zu bezeichnen, als diese Wirklichkeit selbst ganz begründet ist in ihrer Beziehung auf die Schöpfungswirklichkeit. Wie also die gefallene Welt und die gefallene Wirklichkeit allein durch ihre Beziehung auf die geschafene Welt und die geschaffene Wirklichkeit Bestand hat, so beruht das Gebot in der Sündenvergebung.'

[34] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* in *DBWE* 3, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

[35] Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 3, p. 139.

immediately in preparing his lectures on Creation and Fall and later in his re-narration of Luther's orders of creation and preservation in his theology of the divine mandates, on which he was working at the time of his arrest in April 1943.

The final paragraphs of the lecture make explicit the question: 'to whom does the church speak?' Bonhoeffer gives two answers. On the one hand, the churches come together in the ecumenical movement to speak to Christendom, telling it to hear its Word as the commandment of God because it proceeds from the forgiveness of sins. On the other hand, the Church speaks to the world and tells it to change. Either because of his views concerning the separation of Church and world, or because he is attempting to do what he says by attending to the reality of the Church's situation, Bonhoeffer recognises that neither world nor state pays serious attention to the Church's Word. The most he expects in terms of the political consequence of speaking God's command is that the state may recognise in the commandment a boundary to its own rule and authority.[36] The final paragraph of this lecture acknowledged the fact of disunity within the Church concerning what constitutes truth, to which Bonhoeffer offers no solution.[37]

Concerning the Possibility of a Word of the Church to the World

The way Bonhoeffer frames the question of the relationship of the Church's word to the Church and its Word to the world — and of its sacramental life and its public proclamation of command — is one to which Bonhoeffer returned in a manuscript probably written in 1941.[38] In this unfinished document, which resembles a memorandum rather than a section of a book,[39] Bonhoeffer organised his thinking 'Concerning the possibility of a Word of the Church to the World'.[40]

[36] Note Bonhoeffer's experience of Church–state relations was one largely shaped by the context of the German alliance of 'Throne and Altar'.

[37] In a lecture advocating concentrated attention to reality as the 'sacrament of command', it is striking that Bonhoeffer should nod so casually at the fact of ecclesial disunity without working through his evident pessimism about the ecumenical movement and the potentially devastating consequences of the weakness of the movement for his assumption that the churches might agree on anything sufficiently univocally to speak the divine command.

[38] On the likely dating of the manuscript see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, in *DBW* 6, eds. Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil and Clifford Green (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1998), p. 355, n. 1; *DBWE* 6, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 352, n. 1.

[39] The essay was included by Eberhard Bethge in editions of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, and also included in the 1992 edition in the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*. However, the editors' opinion was divided on which texts Bonhoeffer intended it for inclusion in his *Ethics* (see Editors' introduction, *DBWE* 6, p. 32). My own view is that this text does *not* belong in the *Ethics*.

[40] 'Über die Möglichkeit des Wortes der Kirche and die Welt' (*DBW* 6, pp. 354–64); *DBWE* 6, pp. 352–62 (where the translation given — 'On the Possibility of the Church's Message to the World' — obscures the reference to a Lutheran theology of the 'word').

In a clear echo of his 1932 lecture, he begins by stating that '[w]hat is necessary is a concrete directive in the concrete situation'.[41] In his response, however, Bonhoeffer is less confident about the Church's public authority. To be sure, the Church has something to say about worldly things, but the Church simply does not have solutions to every problem the world has. The Word Jesus gives in Scripture 'is not an answer to human questions and problems, but the divine answer to the divine question addressed to human beings': it is not a solution (*Lösung*) but redemption (*Erlösung*) for the world. On this basis Bonhoeffer ruled out a way of relating Church to world which he believes to be characteristically 'Anglo-Saxon' (a term he always used dismissively), namely a crusading approach to worldly evils for which he uses the anti-slavery movement, Prohibition, and the formation of the League of Nations as examples. It would be wrong, Bonhoeffer continued, to conclude from this that the Church has no political task '[b]ut we will not recognise its [the Church's] legitimate task unless we first find the correct starting point'.[42] The correct starting point for the Word of the Church to the world is the Word of God to the world, which (reiterating his 1932 formulation) is always proclaimed as Law and Gospel. In 1932, Bonhoeffer made commandment dependent on the proclamation of forgiveness, striking a positive note concerning the authority of the Church's Word to the world. But by 1941 (on the basis, it is reasonable to speculate, of his experience of the Church struggle) he now asserts negatively that while the Church may reprehend public policy at variance with Gospel and Law it may only offer its alternative proposal as a word of counsel (not command). He concludes that:

- the Church does not speak to the world on the basis of shared convictions (such as natural law)
- there are not two moral laws — one for the Church, another for the world — since God's entire Word, Gospel and Law, are for all people and all time.

Making reference in a marginal note to 'Rome' and to the 'USA, e.g., Prohibition', he resists attempts to justify any distinction between the autonomy of the state and 'the heteronomy of an ecclesiastical theocracy' because 'before God there is no autonomous realm'.[43]

The Influence of Luther's Early Sacramental Theology

Reading Bonhoeffer's lecture, and connecting it to similar discussions elsewhere in his writings, has taken us part of the way towards understanding what Bonhoeffer meant by stating that 'reality is the sacrament of command'. It has also allowed me to display the evidence for claiming that 'Towards a theological basis for the World

[41] *DBWE* 6, p. 353.
[42] *DBWE* 6, p. 356, Bonhoeffer's italics.
[43] *DBWE* 6, p. 362.

Alliance' constitutes the theological agenda with which Bonhoeffer was occupied from 1932 until 1943. But how far does this take us towards Bonhoeffer's understanding of the relationship between worship and ethics? Are we any the wiser about why, for Bonhoeffer, the sacraments are said to 'guarantee the validity' of the proclamation of forgiveness, rather than performing it? To illuminate Bonhoeffer's views still further it is helpful to turn briefly to the early Lutheran background to Bonhoeffer's understanding of 'sacrament'.

Luther's 95 theses (1517) focused his dispute with Rome on indulgences and Papal authority.[44] However, following his meeting in 1518 with Cardinal Cajetan, reformation of the sacraments became more central to his aspirations for ecclesial reform. In three sermons delivered in 1519 Luther developed the view, against Cajetan's Thomistic theology, that the sacraments do not of themselves have any objective salvific effect, but depend rather on the mutual relation between God's word of promise and the faith of the one who receives it. For Luther there exists a sequential relationship between the absolution spoken by the priest, the words of forgiveness that externalise and express divine grace, and the faith that accepts that which is spoken. 'Everything', Luther says, 'then depends on this faith which alone makes the sacraments accomplish that which they signify, and everything the priest says come true'.[45] Within a sacrament one may distinguish firstly the sacrament or sign (he uses the terms interchangeably), secondly its meaning, and thirdly, faith, which is thereby taken up into a Lutheran understanding of the sacraments. The sacrament is therefore, according to Luther, an external sign of an inner reality. Thus Luther speaks of the form of bread and wine as the sign, of fellowship as its meaning, and of reception of the sign in faith which is a true and personal belief in salvation.[46] In *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther concludes that:

> we may learn from this that in every promise of God two things are presented to us, the word and the sign, so that we are to understand the word to be the testament, but the sign to be the sacrament. Thus, in the mass, the word of Christ is the testament, and the bread and wine are the sacrament. And as there is greater power in the word than in the sign, so there is greater power in the testament than in the sacrament; for a man can have and use the word or testament apart from the sign or sacrament. 'Believe' says Augustine, 'and you have eaten'.[47]

[44] For a good overview of Luther's sacramental theology see Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), particularly chapters 13, 31 and 32.

[45] 'The Sacrament of Penance', p. 11 in *Luther's Works: The Word and Sacrament*, American Edition 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1960).

[46] Cf. *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, pp. 50–51. Bonhoeffer cites this sermon in *Sanctorum Communio*, *DBWE* 1, p. 179.

[47] *Luther's Works*, American Edition 36, ed. A. R. Wentz, trans. A. T. W. Steinhäuser *et al.* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 45.

What is crucial here, for the purpose of understanding Bonhoeffer's sacramental theology, is his firm confessional adherence to a distinction between the word of Christ, the external sacrament that signs, and the emphasis placed on the role of faith in receiving the promises of God signed in the sacraments. In Lutheran theology, the sacraments in and of themselves are not instruments of divine action, whether on persons or in public, unless accompanied by faith. The sacraments depend for their effect on the mutuality of the word of God that they sign and the reception of that word in faith, which itself is a gift of God. This proves to be the basis of Bonhoeffer's premise that the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper guarantee the validity of signed forgiveness, rather than directly enacting or performing it. This, in turn, helps us to grasp his conclusion that just as the sacraments guarantee the validity of the proclamation of the Gospel (which is apprehended only where there is faith), knowledge of reality guarantees the validity of the Church's proclamation of Law (which is apprehended only where there is obedience). In the same way that Gospel and Law are not, in Lutheran theology, identified or conflated, for Bonhoeffer sacraments and command are to be understood as distinct aspects of the one proclamation of God's word. And as the proclamation of the Law is based or founded on the Gospel, the ethical command is based or founded on the proclamation of forgiveness, validated in the celebration of the sacraments.[48] Our discussion of Bonhoeffer may be summarised in five points:

- Bonhoeffer's view concerning the possibility of a Word of the Church to the world, condensed in the statement that 'reality is the sacrament of [the ethical] command', was one he held with remarkable consistency from 1932 until at least 1943.
- Bonhoeffer's assertion that 'reality is the sacrament of [the ethical] command' depends for its intelligibility on Lutheran distinctions between law and gospel, word, sign and faith, church and state, and on Luther's doctrine of the orders of creation and preservation.
- For Bonhoeffer the Word of the Church to the world is the Word of God to the world.
- For Bonhoeffer the Church's Word to the world arises only from its proclamation of the Gospel of forgiveness — with which it is, nonetheless, not to be confused.
- Because it depends on God's ultimate Word of forgiveness, the Church's penultimate Word to the world is spoken with a degree of humility (one that varies in degree between Bonhoeffer's accounts of 1932 and 1941).

[48] Bonhoeffer's account in 1932 anticipates in certain respects the distinction made in the *Ethics* between the penultimate and the ultimate, in which the penultimate is dependent on the ultimate (*Ethics*, *DBWE* 6, pp. 151ff.).

Conclusions

It is time to 'listen in' to the conversation between Cavanaugh and Bonhoeffer on the sacraments and politics. Both theologians are concerned to explicate that ancient confession of the Church that 'Jesus is Lord', and to do so in ways that realise Jesus' authority concretely and politically. Both men understand the Church to be 'Christ's body' in more than a representative or merely 'metaphorical' sense. And for both theologians, these insights are worked through in creative exploration of the political dimension of the Church's sacraments. These are substantial points of agreement, but here their theological paths diverge on at least two further matters.

The first divergence concerns eschatology. Cavanaugh's eschatology is essentially realised, while Bonhoeffer's is more in keeping with the Pauline tension between the now and the not yet. Cavanaugh, who knows the imperfections of the Church, prefers to describe the Church not as it is but as it theologically should be: a 'theopolitical' body clearly distinguishable from the secular body politic. Bonhoeffer is more inclined to operate with categories of the penultimate and the ultimate. Jesus Christ is certainly *pro me* in the Church, but the Church speaks God's Word penultimately, only in the promise of God's ultimate Word of forgiveness. The second divergence flows directly from the first. Bonhoeffer, following Luther, recognises in social bodies other than the Church — his mandates name family and state as examples — other bodies in which a space is kept open for human community. Cavanaugh, on the other hand, proposes a kind of 'liturgical supercessionism', in which the liturgically perfected body of Christ renders invalid now all other kinds of body, making it axiomatic that the Church is true and good and showing up all other 'public things' as mere forgeries.

Returning to my summary of the discussion, the first point — concerning the consistency of Bonhoeffer's theological ethics — is largely 'domestic' to Bonhoeffer scholarship and need not detain us here. The second point — that Bonhoeffer's view of the ethical sacrament of reality is intelligible only in the context of Luther's theology — raises the question of the extent to which a confessional understanding of the sacraments is likely to shape the view one takes of the relationship between worship and ethics. Certainly, some of the issues concerning how worship shapes ethics are as likely to be disputed intra-confessionally as much as inter-confessionally. Yet, if virtue-ethics is right to insist that particular traditions form individuals and communities in particular ways — a conviction Cavanaugh applauds and which, for what it is worth, I share — it would be strange if Cavanaugh's Catholic tradition and Bonhoeffer's Lutheran tradition had done nothing to shape them distinctively. Working within parameters set by Lutheran theology, Bonhoeffer distinguishes between sign and meaning in sacrament and emphasises the role of

faith in receiving the promise signed in the sacraments. If what matters is belief then the sacraments themselves assume a secondary role: they confirm but they do not effect that which is signed. In contrast, for Cavanaugh, the 'Eucharist makes real the presence of Christ both in the elements and in the body of believers'.[49] For this reason he is able boldly to assert that 'the Eucharist effects the body of Christ'[50] while Bonhoeffer holds that the performance of the divine commandment rests on the forgiveness of sins guaranteed by the sacraments.

The third and fourth points in my summary of the early discussion in this paper — that the Word of the Church to the world is God's Word, which arises from its proclamation of forgiveness — constitute points of agreement between Bonhoeffer and Cavanaugh. But the final point — that the Church's Word to the world is a penultimate Word that may be spoken authoritatively only where the Church acknowledges that its ethical command to the world blasphemes the name of God — once more pinpoints a confessional dimension to the debate.

Cardinal Ratzinger, long before his election as Benedict XVI, made clear that for Catholics the Church is a 'superhuman reality' whose 'fundamental structures are willed by God himself and are thus untouchable'. The liberal historian Felipe Fernàndez-Armesto predicted in 1995 that '[t]he effect [of Christian fundamentalism] will be mitigated if the Catholic Church — the world's biggest and most widespread communion — keeps up what may become a unique commitment to moral absolutism in defence of human dignity, individual freedom, social justice and the sanctity of life'.[51] Set against a Catholic confidence in universal moral absolutes, Luther (and Bonhoeffer) set out in their ethics from the conviction that they are members of a church in which each individual is *simul iustus et peccator*. Is this the reason that Bonhoeffer is so sanguine about the fact of ecclesial disunity? Is this the reason that he cannot escape the paradox implicit in his dual assertion that though the Church does speak God's Word to the world through the 'ethical sacrament of reality', it errs and sins as it speaks it? Bonhoeffer's last word on the relation of worship and public action is informed by the politics of human frailty:

> Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation to humankind and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and in doing what is right among the people.[52]

[49] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, p. 205.
[50] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, p. 206.
[51] Felipe Fernàndez-Armesto, *Millennium* (London: Bantam, 1995), p. 701.
[52] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 300 (May 1944, translation amended).