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Life Together in Word and Sacrament: Insights from Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Liturgy as a Communications Model¹

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Aufsatz wird auf die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers Bezug genommen, um daraus die Liturgie als Model der Kommunikation hervorzuheben. Das gemeinschaftliche Leben im Wort und Sakrament bietet die Basis einer gelungenen Existenz.

Schlagwörter

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Liturgy,
Communion, Communication,
Sacrament

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gegenüber zeigen. Jetzt – Ihre freundliche Nachsicht vorausgesetzt – möchte ich auf Englisch weiter sprechen: in der Sprache, in der ich sorgfältiger denken kann.

Let me begin by telling you something of one community from which I come, a community a little like your own, and by reflecting on one important thinker about community life who might still influence our reflections today.

Twenty-eight years ago, when I came to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia to serve as chaplain and as professor of liturgy, I discovered that I had come to a place that had already been greatly marked by the vision of the German pastor and Christian witness, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. To my joy, I discovered in the library there a precious first edition of Bonhoeffer's *Gemeinsames Leben*, the very book that had been published in 1939 here in Munich by Christian Kaiser Verlag and that recorded for us the basic vision of the short-lived theological seminary of the Bekennende Kirche at Finkenwalde, the seminary that Bonhoeffer had led. Indeed, in Philadelphia I had come to the place where the first English language translation of that book had been prepared by one of my predecessor professors, John W. Doberstein, and published as *Life Together* in 1954. And I was at the school that would serve as a center for the complete new English translation of Bonhoeffer's works, with a new edition of *Life Together* issued in 1996 from this center. Even more, I had come to a seminary which, while fiercely interested in being a place of scholarship and learning, was also a place deeply interested in common life and common worship. The example of Finkenwalde, a school which had been under profound and dangerous pressures in another age, was remembered in Philadelphia with thanksgiving, and, in a new situation and under very different pressures, something of Finkenwalde was being attempted again.

It is not that we so much succeeded nor that the experiment endured. In the end, it did not. But I do remember that at that time we did begin each academic year inviting new students to

spend some time reading and considering Bonhoeffer's *Gemeinsames Leben* as a proposal for our life together. We did try to think together about what Bonhoeffer calls "the Day Alone" and "the Day Together," seeking to organize worship in such a way that a serious school would also sometimes become an assembly around Jesus Christ in word and sacrament. And we did recommend to each other what the literature on Bonhoeffer calls the "Finkenwalde Rule": never to speak about another member of our community in his or her absence or, if this should happen, to tell him or her about it afterwards. Another form of that counsel, in our Seminary, was to urge the keeping of Matthew 18:15 among us: if you have something against another, tell that person directly, seeking amendment or reconciliation; do not tell about this person indirectly, in gossip or in passive aggressive behavior. That remains, of course, an important rule for any healthy community. But as Eberhard Bethge says of the Finkenwalde Rule, we too probably learned more from our failure to observe it and then our renewed dedication to keep it than from any brilliant success or from any lectures on reconciliation or on avoiding gossip.²

Still, though all of us had spent some time at universities, many of us at that time agreed with the judgment Bonhoeffer himself had when he, in 1934, was thinking about taking up the challenge of seminary leadership and wrote to a Swiss friend he had known at Union Seminary in New York:

An die Universität glaube ich nicht mehr, habe ja eigentlich nie daran geglaubt – zu Ihrem Ärgern. Die gesamte Ausbildung des Theologennachwuchses gehört heute in kirchlich-klösterliche Schulen, in denen die reine Lehre, die Bergpredigt und der Kultus ernstgenommen werden – was gerade alles drei auf der

² Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 349; cf. Geoffrey Kelly, ed., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works*, 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 94.

Universität nicht der Fall ist und unter gegenwärtigen Umständen unmöglich ist.³

What *reine Lehre*/"pure doctrine" actually is and how we may take the Sermon on the Mount and worship seriously and whether *klösterlich*/"monastic" is actually the right word are all matters that bore and still bear discussion. But you see the point. Formation as a theologian must be exactly that: formation, not simply education. We were, for a time at the Philadelphia Seminary, seeking to juxtapose theological studies, in the widest and most scholarly sense, with something of "life together."

Perhaps the most important way we were doing that was by taking worship seriously. With a schedule that involved everyone in the community who wished to be involved, we celebrated the holy communion once a week and thus keeping every Wednesday as a "station day" or a kind of second Sunday for our community. And around that central Wednesday eucharist, we also gathered for preaching services and morning and evening prayer on the other days of the week. The point was not simply to create a laboratory for people who were training to be pastors nor only to set out a ministry to student needs. Rather, in the very same space as the school and with the very same people who were involved in the pursuits of the school, in its research and its necessary critical judgments, we sought on regular occasions to gather as church, as open community around Jesus Christ present in word and sacrament. Thus, "school" – and the hierarchies and judgments of "school" – were by no means abandoned but were relativized, even criticized. Thus communication between us was continually being re-established on the basis of God's judgment and God's grace. Thus professor and student were side by side with hands out for the gift of the body and blood of Jesus Christ and side-by-side in being turned toward the needs of our neighbors. And

³ 1934 letter from Berlin to Erwin Sutz (GS 1:42).

thus the important vocation to study well, profoundly and critically, was itself continually being re-established among us, but always on a deeper ground than simply the quest to prove or improve our own selves.

That was at least the idea. We did not always enact the idea, I know. But the idea was shared, at least in part, with Finkenwalde and with Bonhoeffer's remarkable *Gemeinsames Leben*, a book that might be considered as a twentieth century evangelical version of St. Benedict's *Regula*, a Christian classic of community life still worthy of our reading and reflection.

We are gathered at the 25th anniversary of your excellent *Collegium Oecumenicum*. It, too, is a community that seeks to set life together next to university studies. I do not know this community well, though I have admired it from afar and deeply respected many of its participants. I know that many courses of study, many nations and many confessions are represented in this community and that dialogue across these boundaries is part of the goal and the strength of your common life. It therefore seemed to me that you too, precisely in order to enable that dialogue in health, might have reflected on Finkenwalde – or that you might find it useful to do so. You too might read *Gemeinsames Leben* again or for the first time.

So, it is no surprise to me that your theme this day is “communication.” My field of study is Christian liturgy and Pastor Hoenen has asked me to think aloud with you about how Christian liturgy might model modes of communication. But my experience is also with a community that tried to take some themes from Finkenwalde seriously as it placed worship at the heart of its communal life. In what follows, then, let me propose to you just three matters that are expressed in *Gemeinsames Leben*, that also come to expression in Christian liturgy, and that I think matter immensely for healthy communication.

Although Bonhoeffer's book has material that deals directly with the organization and meaning of worship – scripture reading and preaching, prayer, psalm and hymn singing, confession and absolution, and holy communion – and I think

that the actual organization of worship does matter a great deal to community life, all three of the matters I want to talk about are more basic yet. All three come from the first chapter of the book, a chapter called simply "Gemeinschaft." The three matters are these:

1. In healthy Christian community, human relationships are never immediate but always mediated.
2. In healthy Christian community, one gives thanks for the others one is actually given. One does not seek to have some other, ideal partners nor to make one's actual companions into those ideal others.

And, 3., a healthy Christian community remains open, welcoming others and seeing itself as part of a world-wide community.

Let me say more.

In one of his most important observations, Bonhoeffer writes: "Innerhalb der geistlichen Gemeinschaft gibt es niemals und in keiner Weise ein 'unmittelbares' Verhältnis des Einen zum Andern, während in der seelisches Gemeinschaft ein tiefes, ursprüngliches seelisches Verlangen nach Gemeinschaft, nach unmittelbaren Berührung mit anderen menschlichen Seelen... lebt."⁴ And then: Weil Christus zwischen mir und dem Andern steht, darum darf ich nicht nach unmittelbare Gemeinschaft mit ihm verlangen.⁵ ["Within the spiritual community there is never, in any way whatsoever, an "immediate" relationship of one to another. However, in the self-centered community there exists a profound, elemental emotional desire for community, for immediate contact with other human souls..." And "because Christ stands between me and an other, I must not long for unmediated community with that person."⁶]

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gemeinsames Leben* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1939), 17; cf. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* 5:28.

⁵ *Gemeinsames Leben*, 19; cf. DBW 5:31.

⁶ Kelly, 40-41, 43.

This position of Bonhoeffer has certainly been criticized. It has been argued that Bonhoeffer here was naïve about actual human relationships, was too marked by dialectical theology, was undervaluing human eros as a theological theme, or was simply reacting against the strong linkages between romanticism and Nazi ideology. Some of those criticisms may be accurate and important. Agape and eros are not so easily distinguished in actual life. All human relationships have a little bit of desire mixed in, and that is not necessarily wrong. The question will be whether one still lets the other be free, thankfully acknowledges the difference of the other, knows the boundaries of respectful life with the other.

And, in that sense, Bonhoeffer's insight remains deeply important and deeply right. The privileged place for a search toward a genuinely immediate relationship with another – for the expression of mutual desire and the enacting of mutual vulnerability – surely exists: it is largely within the boundaries and protections of marriage and family or of life-long committed relationship. There such relationship can be beautiful and life-giving, though it remains always dangerous. Healthy families also know that even within the family we do not entirely know each other. The other remains a mystery, even and especially there. Spouses also need to respect the distance between each other, honor their differences, not turn intimacy into tyranny.

But for most human relationships, to insist upon immediacy is to insist upon the impossible, to turn away from mutual respect and to create the strong possibility, as Bonhoeffer says, of “forcing the other into one's own sphere of power and influence,”⁷ a forcing in which the strong dominate the weak. No. I have no right to direct access to the other. “I” and “Thou” are not to be fused. And in order for “I” and “Thou” to stand before each other in mutual respect, to see and receive the

⁷ *Gemeinsames Leben*, 17; see Kelly, 41.

reality and the gift of the other, they need a place to meet, a means, a mediating center. For Bonhoeffer, that center is always Jesus Christ. I am given the presence and reality of my sister or my brother only in him.

For me, that truth is repeatedly enacted in Christian liturgy. It has seemed to me that my brother or my sister are never more close than when I stand with my hands outstretched to receive from my brother or sister or to give to my brother or sister the gift of Jesus Christ in his own self-giving, in the broken bread or the shared cup of his meal. That closeness is not because we have intimately talked, nor even because we know much about each other. It is because we are drawn together in our need and in our hope, in our death and in our life, in Jesus Christ. We are called by name not because our actual name is used here, but because we – in our deepest reality – are included in the words “given for you all” für euch alle gegeben. Standing before each other, across the holy gift between us, my vulnerability – my very self – is seen by my sister or brother, also standing there, and I see his or her self as well: but mediated, profoundly respected, free, in Christ, and only so. Standing there, I have nothing else to give or to receive but Christ, and yet – here, now – that is everything. Being together called by name, being seen, being known – and thus knowing each other – also occurs in the reading and preaching of scripture in the liturgy. The stories and images of the scripture draw us in, reflect and hold our lives in different ways, evoke for each of us something of our own fears and losses and sins, something of our own hopes and possibilities for new life. But then, because we believe that Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is alive to us in these very texts, we are known by him and held together into life in the word. And thus we meet each other in this word. The preacher can speak to us all in general, and yet be speaking quite specifically – in a mediated way – to each one of us. In such a way, Christ stands quite concretely between me and the other in the actually enacted word and sacrament.

Christian communication, then, has its root in shared and immensely important, central symbols, in those sounds and gestures, images and objects which provide a place for a community of persons, in differing ways but nonetheless truly, to meet together and participate in larger and deeper meanings – including the meanings of each individual person – than they otherwise would have known. The symbol is the meeting place. But then, to my second point, Bonhoeffer in *Gemeinsames Leben* also said this: Unzählige Male ist eine ganze christliche Gemeinschaft daran zerbrochen, dass sie aus einem Wunschbild heraus lebte... Weil Gott den einzigen Grund unserer Gemeinschaft schon gelegt hat, weil Gott uns längst, bevor wir in das gemeinsame Leben mit anderen Christen eintraten, mit diesen zu einem Leibe zusammengeschlossen hat in Jesus Christus, darum treten wir nicht als die Fordernden, sondern als die Dankenden und Empfangenden in das gemeinsame Leben mit anderen Christen ein. Wir danken Gott für das, was er an uns getan hat. Wir danken Gott, dass er uns Brüder gibt...⁸ [“On innumerable occasions a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image... Because God has already laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive. We thank God for what God has done for us. We thank God for giving us other Christians...”⁹]

Again, for Bonhoeffer, in healthy Christian community, one gives thanks for the others one is actually given. One does not seek to have some other, ideal partners nor to make one’s actual companions into those ideal others. I think that in this assertion, *Gemeinsames Leben* is quite right. Idealism here is frequently the source of a person’s discontent and disappoint-

⁸ *Gemeinsames Leben*, 12-13; *DBW* 5:23-24.

⁹ Kelly, 35-36.

ment in community life, sometimes the source of dictatorial or angry and reactionary behavior.

Rather, in community life, one needs to begin with thanksgiving for the actual persons who make up the community. One needs to let them be who they are. One needs to see their gifts and their failings clear-eyed, aware also of one's own gifts and failings. One needs to let the others be free. Indeed, repeatedly releasing the other to be God's creature, not our own, is immensely important to community life. Then that other can be seen by us as the very bearer of God's word to us, as a living sign of God, ein leibliches Gnadezeichen der Gegenwart des dreieinigen Gottes¹⁰ ["a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God"¹¹]. Says Bonhoeffer: two people meeting in Christ – the one visiting the other in sickness, for example – empfangen und begegnen einander, wie man dem Herrn begegnet, in Ehrfurcht, in Demut und Freude¹² ["receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility and joy"¹³

More: Bonhoeffer says, Gott hat gewollt, dass wir sein lebendiges Wort suchen und finden sollen... im Menschenmund. Darum braucht der Christ den Christen, der ihm Gottes Wort sagt...¹⁴ [God has willed that we should seek and find God's living Wort... in the mouths of human beings. Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God's word to them.¹⁵]

I have found this idea also to be symbolically enacted in the repeated practice of Christian liturgy. The most important moments of Christian liturgy – the beginning of the liturgy itself, for example, or the opening prayer of that liturgy or, in

¹⁰ *Gemeinsames Leben*, 7.

¹¹ Kelly, 29.

¹² *Gemeinsames Leben*, 7.

¹³ Kelly, 29.

¹⁴ *Gemeinsames Leben*, 9.

¹⁵ Kelly, 32.

some traditions, the proclamation of the Gospel or, among us all, the beginning of the thanksgiving prayer at the Lord's Table – are classically marked by an exchange of greetings between the presider and the assembly: The Lord be with you, says the presider. And also with you, responds the assembly. In some communities, the intention of this greeting is also brought to expression by a gesture. The presider and the congregation open their hands toward each other or they bow to each other or both. Then, in the flow of the service, as the word service becomes the meal celebration of the holy communion, as the intercessions are concluded and a collection of gifts is about to be made, a further form of this greeting is enacted. Called "the Peace" or "the exchange of peace," it involves each one in the assembly turning to others who stand immediately nearby and exchanging words – "the peace of the Lord be with you" – and gestures: a handshake, a kiss or embrace, a bow.

The point, of course, is that each one present is honored. In Christ – in the risen Lord – each one is seen to have great dignity, to belong to a personal communal assembly – a "we" in which the individual "I" has not been swallowed up but is a unique personhood still in harmony with community – a personal communal assembly that has been gifted by the triune God with astonishing dignity. In such an assembly, the smallest child, the weakest member is also so honored, equally with anyone who elsewhere might be counted as "great." All are welcome in this place. The symbol urges us toward gratitude for who is actually there. In such an assembly, the presider cannot continue in her or his tasks without being prayed for by the assembly, nor can the assembly continue without the same prayer from the presider. And the collection cannot be taken nor the table set without first enacting a symbol of reconciliation and mutual peace. It is indeed a symbol. We meet the others there. Though we may not feel particularly at peace with those around us, the symbol invites us to see our neighbor as a minister of Christ's own peace to us and to see ourselves as a minister of that same peace toward the others. Our feelings may

follow and be formed by our symbolic actions, but “the Peace” is not so much about what I feel as what we are. We are drawn by the symbol into being grateful receivers of the ones around us, given to us as they are by Christ, and not being demanders that they – or we – be something else, some ideal we imagine. And we are drawn by the symbol to see that the other is a sign of the presence of God and a speaker of God’s word to us.

Christian communication, then, proceeds with thanksgiving for the reality of the other and with honoring of the dignity of the other and with prayer for the peace of the other.

And, finally, to my third point, Bonhoeffer also wrote: ...ein gemeinsames Leben unter dem Wort wird nur dort gesund bleiben, wo es sich nicht als Bewegung, als Orden, als Verein, als collegium pietatis aufbaut, sondern wo es sich als ein Stück der einen, heiligen, allgemeinen, christlichen Kirche versteht, wo es an Not, Kampf, und Verheissung der ganzen Kirche handelnd und leidend teilnimmt.¹⁶ [“...a life together under the Word will stay healthy only when it does not form itself into a movement, an order, a society, a collegium pietatis, but instead understands itself as being part of the one, holy, universal, Christian church, sharing through its deeds and suffering in the hardships and struggles and promise of the whole church.”¹⁷]

Thus, according to *Gemeinsames Leben*, a healthy Christian community remains open, welcoming others and seeing itself as part of a world-wide connection of communities. In some ways, I am quite aware that this quotation from Bonhoeffer stands in a certain tension with his earlier letter in which he called for theological schools that were klösterlich. I think that this tension is healthy: of course a strong community will have something of an “intentional community” or a “movement” about it. Finkenwalde did. But it will also criticize the ways in which intentional communities and movements can close in upon themselves. It will seek to guard the open door, so that

¹⁶ *Gemeinsames Leben*, 21; DBW 5:32.

¹⁷ Kelly, 45.

people can freely come in and go out. And it will seek signs of connection to many, many people who are not here. If the community is Christian, that wider connection will be to the whole catholic church throughout the world, and beyond the church, to all of humanity and all of the earth.

Again, I find this idea to be repeatedly signed by the way Christian liturgy is celebrated. For one thing, a healthy Christian liturgy will always seek to be intensely focused on its center in word and sacrament. It will thus have some similarity to a *Bewegung*, even to a *collegium pietatis*. But at the same time, it will try to counter any boundary such intensity begins to build around itself. It will always also seek to have an open door: to welcome all who come, to draw them freely into that intense center, and at the very same time to encourage everyone who comes also to go – to go to their needy neighbors, to go to their vocations elsewhere in the world, to go to life itself beyond the walls of the meeting place, to go where God goes, to the good and needy earth. The watchword for renewed liturgy can rightly be: “strong center; open door.” For another thing, healthy Christian liturgy will include intercessions for a wider world than the life of its own participants. It will pray for churches in many other places. It will especially intercede with God for the little ones, the wretched ones, the suffering ones throughout humanity, doing so with concrete intercessions, crafted as from a priestly people understanding its task as standing before God for the sake of the needs of the world.

Christian communication, then, includes a perspective that is wider than simply you and me talking.

I have repeatedly talked about “healthy Christian community” coming to expression in “healthy Christian liturgy.” I am quite aware that Christian liturgy is by no means always healthy! It is quite possible that Christian communities meet in worship in which the holy supper is not frequently celebrated and distributed as Christ’s uniting gift, or worship in which only small bits of the scripture are read and these are not understood as holding us together into life in Christ, or worship in which no

mutually honoring greetings are exchanged or in which one turns in greeting only to one's friends and not to whomever one is given, the persons who are actually there nearby, whether they are friends or not, or worship in which the door is not really open and no one is prayed for beside ourselves. I know that happens. Still, I hope you will also know that the ecumenical movement for liturgical reform has continued to call all Christian communities to an intense life in word and sacrament that is also marked by the open door, by the mutual ministry of peace and respect, and by intercession for a needy world. Thus, the ecumenical movement for liturgical reform has sought to clarify and strengthen in our midst the very matters that I have argued give symbolic expression to healthy communication: mediated relationships; gratitude for the quite different other; insertion in a wider world.

I think that you yourselves might be able to further reflect on how these liturgical symbols, set next to the reflections of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, can show us some of the characteristics of good communication, communication across all the boundaries and differences that mark our lives these days. But here is a beginning: Genuine communication requires genuine and shared symbols. Another person and I come into contact with each other most profoundly through means: crafted words, careful gestures, poetry, art, music, images. These means gather each of us in differing ways, illuminate parts of ourselves and of our world in differing ways, and yet they allow a free and communicating encounter. For Christianity, the deepest of these means are the word and sacrament of the Christian meeting, and the central place for meeting another is always in Jesus Christ as he – and the truth of death and life in him – are present in these symbols. But the analogy of mediated encounter can be gladly and helpfully extended by Christians to all communication: healthy meeting is mediated meeting, and the media themselves need to be honest and profound.

Then, good communication also proceeds from letting the other be free, seeing the difference of the other with thanksgiving. For

Christians this idea is especially present in the sense that the other is God's creation, not mine, and that I need the other in order to hear God's word which is always coming to me from outside of myself and always in the mouth and gesture of other human beings. But the analogy of thanksgiving for the other can be gladly and helpfully extended by Christians to all communication: good human contact means attending to difference, not hiding it, and seeing difference as a gift.

And then, good communication is never a closed circle, cutting itself off from the wider world, but always includes an awareness of a wider world. For Christians, this wider world is God's world, and the wider church is present in that world not to complain about it but to welcome it, to pray for it and to bear witness to it in love. But the analogy of the open door and the prayer for the whole church in the world can be gladly and helpfully extended by Christians to all communication: serious talk between us here will also always include thinking about and openness toward the well being of others elsewhere.

That is a beginning. I am quite aware that these reflections are by no means all that needs to be said on your theme at this 25th anniversary celebration. I am therefore very glad to be just one among several speakers here and just one voice along with all of your voices as we together consider the topic. Still, I hope these few notes on communication, notes that we might see arising when we put the gifts of the renewed Christian liturgy next to the still sharp thoughts of the martyred leader of Finkenwalde, could be important to you. Here, in the Collegium Oecumenicum, you too are a *Life Together*, a *gemeinsames Leben*, a kind of Finkenwalde in the present time. And you too keep here, amid your studies, the celebration of word and sacrament, in which you seek to greet each other in peace, hold the door open, pray for a needy world, hold out your hands to receive together what you are, and then turn to the needs of your neighbor. There already, I think, is a model for the communication you seek.

Finally this: please hear what I have said as an earnest prayer before God that the Collegium may continue to do so for many more years. Zum Abschluss: Bitte hören Sie, was ich gesagt habe, an als ernsthaftes Gebet vor Gott, dass das Collegium viele weitere Jahre so weiterleben werde.