

Toward a Hermeneutics of Divine Revelation

Bonhoeffer's Quarrel with Barth

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Dieser Beitrag wirft einen neuen Blick auf den Streit zwischen Karl Barth und Dietrich Bonhoeffer hinsichtlich der Frage nach göttlicher Offenbarung. Im ersten Abschnitt wird Barths aktualistische Darstellung der göttlichen Offenbarung untersucht, die zugleich einen ersten Einstieg in die Problematik der Offenbarung bietet. Der zweite Teil beleuchtet jene Art und Weise, in der Bonhoeffer versucht, Barths Position zu verbessern, indem er Offenbarung als durch Geschichte und menschliche Sozialität innerhalb der Kirchengemeinschaft vermittelt auffasst. Auf diese Weise bietet Bonhoeffer eine bessere Position, um eine Hermeneutik der göttlichen Offenbarung zu entwickeln, die zu zeitgenössischen Fragen der theologischen Erkenntnistheorie Stellung nehmen kann.

In this paper, I return to a dispute between Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer over the issue of divine revelation. Far from being simply a matter of historical interest, this debate, I seek to show, also has contemporary theological significance. By letting ourselves be tutored by Barth and Bonhoeffer, and, more crucially, by directly wrestling with the problems that concerned them, we stand to gain important resources for thinking about how God's presence manifests itself to us today. As I will argue below, what was at stake for Barth and Bonhoeffer – and what we must still think through now – concerns the proper role of “mediation” in revelatory phenomena, i. e., whether and how divine revelation gives itself to us in a way that is mediated by history and sociality. Put differently, I am interested in whether revelation partakes of identifiable hermeneutic structures, and if so, what these structures *are* and why revelation is characterized by *these* structures. Above all, we are trying to understand what such hermeneutic structures, which have been instituted by God in divine revelation, disclose about who God is and how God wishes to make himself known to us in this life.

As a way of broaching this set of issues, I will juxtapose the positions of Barth and Bonhoeffer in terms of their respective accounts of divine revelation. In the first section of my paper, I critically examine Barth's 1929 lecture “Fate and Idea in Theology,” which contains what is perhaps Barth's clearest and most succinct articulation of his *actualistic* approach to divine revelation.¹ Additionally, this particular lecture will serve as a stark

¹ There is one further, and not insignificant, reason for devoting our full attention to this of Barth's writings. As is evidenced by extensive quotations in “Act and Being”, Bonhoeffer was intimately familiar with this lecture. Moreover, many of Bonhoeffer's most trenchant critiques of Barth's viewpoint on the topic of revelation are

backdrop against which Bonhoeffer's more hermeneutically developed approach to revelation can come into view. In the paper's second part, I turn to relevant passages from Bonhoeffer's two dissertations, *Sanctorum Communio* (1930) and *Act and Being* (1931), in order to unpack Bonhoeffer's robustly hermeneutic approach to divine revelation. The bulk of this section is devoted to examining the intricacies of Bonhoeffer's conception of revelation in the form of "Christ existing as community" (*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*) and to demonstrating how it improves upon Barth's actualistic account. Finally, I conclude my paper by commending Bonhoeffer's position and briefly discussing "the profound this-worldliness" of divine revelation,² which gives itself to us here and now in the midst of history and in the (seemingly) mundane encounters between human beings.

1. Barth: Revelation as the Gracious Act of God

We begin with Barth, who makes a powerful – though partial – first step in thinking about revelation. Even if we must in the end go beyond him, there can be no doubt that we must at least start with him – just as Bonhoeffer did. Barth's chief discovery concerning divine revelation, which he articulated with varying emphases and accents throughout his lengthy theological career, can be stated rather concisely: that God in his sovereign grace has freely willed to make himself known to sinful human beings, and that God does this by means of divine acts which are completely unconditioned by anything save God himself. Critically important here is the question of "how" God discloses himself to us. Barth's answer to this question, as we will see in more detail below, stresses that revelation is an *event* whose sole condition is God himself. In our evaluation of the Barthian position, it will become apparent that this is the point at which Barth is most incisive, but also where Bonhoeffer – rightly, I think – presses him.

1.1 Barth on "Fate" and "Idea" in Theology

In his lecture, Barth invokes the two somewhat enigmatic terms "fate" (*Schicksal*) and "idea" (*Idee*) to signify the philosophical poles between which all of our thinking (including theological thinking) occurs.³ We will briefly examine both concepts in turn before directing our attention to the crucial issue of revelation's "how." First, Barth says, it is only

developed in close conversation with it. As we shall see, this lecture also contains the statement against which Bonhoeffer would come to define his own approach to revelation – at least in this early period of his authorship.

² I am here referencing, and adapting, Bonhoeffer's phrase, "the profound this-worldliness of Christianity." I trust Bonhoeffer would not take issue with my following the spirit, if not the letter, of his expression. Cf. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison*, John W. De Gruchy (Ed.), translated by Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens (DBWE 8), Minneapolis 2010, 485.

³ Two things are worth mentioning. First, although Barth admits that he almost stumbled upon these two words by accident, we must not fail to see that he is here dealing with what he calls "the basic problem of all philosophy," which has historically been named in various ways as the relationship between being and thinking, experience and reason, nature and spirit, heteronomy and autonomy, etc. Second, Bonhoeffer's *Habilitationsschrift* "Act and Being," which is organized according to the two philosophical concepts *Akt* and *Sein*, cannot but be understood as an attempt to address the same set of problems, though in a way that departs from Barth in respect of both method and conclusion.

inevitable that we seek God in our fate – that in knowing God, we advance toward the given, the real. Fate, for Barth, simply stands for theological realism. Realist theology confidently presupposes that God, if he is to be knowable by creatures like us, must take part in being, must become real in our experience (be it subjectively or objectively, inwardly or outwardly).⁴ Voicing his sympathies with this realist presupposition, Barth asks:

“How can we speak of revelation without speaking of God’s givenness? ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us’—what does that mean if not that the Word, and hence the God with whom we have to do, entered into our particular mode of being, that of nature and history?”⁵

Because God is “*causa prima*,” “*ens realissimum*,” and “*actus purus*,” theology cannot but be realist theology. Thus, despite the chastening to which Barth will subject theological realism in the rest of his lecture, he takes seriously its basic intentions: “At the very least,” he claims, “we cannot get around ascribing the quality of being to God, being under quite definite conditions, but certainly being.”⁶

Next, with the term “idea,” Barth names thinking that has been chastened by critical reflection. Rather than presume that God’s givenness is self-evident (in the manner of naïve realism), theological idealism instead seeks to preserve the non-givenness of God by maintaining that “God’s givenness must not only be distinguished, but fundamentally distinguished, from all other being. In relation to all other being God’s being takes on the ascribed quality of non-givenness and to that extent even non-being.”⁷ In short, theological idealism aspires to do justice to God’s hiddenness even in the midst of revelation. It tries to protect theology’s unique object from being confused with, or collapsed into, other objects. Here too, Barth is sympathetic:

“Isn’t the idealist principle of differentiating the non-given from the given justified by our need to understand revelation as *God’s* revelation in contrast to whatever else might somehow be revealed? ... Doesn’t it have to be said that all theology must be just as necessarily idealist as realist?”⁸

Questions will of course have to be posed to idealist theology, but only after we have learned to appreciate its import for Christian theology: its critical understanding of revelation’s givenness. Idealism, for Barth, rightly reminds us that God is never *simply* there, never there as a matter of course (*selbstverständlich*) – even and especially when God draws near in revelation.

⁴ For Barth, theological realism can oscillate between representing God’s givenness as inward and subjective or as outward and objective. Thus on Barth’s reading, Luther rightly saw that the Anabaptists, who claimed that the Holy Spirit is given in the individual’s heart, were every bit as theologically realist as the Roman Catholics, who located God’s givenness in papal authority. Cf. *Karl Barth*, “Fate and Idea in Theology”, in: *The Way of Theology* in Karl Barth, H. Martin Rumscheidt (Ed.), Eugene 1986, 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45 (emphasis original).

1.2 Barth's Divine Actualism

According to Barth's constructive theological proposal, then, realism and idealism ought to correct one another mutually. Yet how is this to be done? He answers that theology, in order to do justice to its unique subject matter and the distinctive manner of its appearance, must try to "think dialectically about how God is given and not given at the same time."⁹ The precise means by which Barth accomplishes this dialectical feat is with his concept of divine actualism. Here we come to the heart of the matter: Barth's answer to the "how" question. As I indicated before, in Barth's view God reveals himself to sinful human beings through divine acts which are entirely unconditioned by anything outside of God himself. In Barth's own words,

"It cannot be understood as though God's reality were accessible apart from God himself as the performer of his work—which is the Word that comes to us. God is therefore given to us neither in the givenness of history and nature nor in that of our own consciousness. In these abstractions from the event of grace, God is not given to us. For grace is the event in which God comes to us in his Word, an event over which God has sole control, and which is strictly momentary."¹⁰

The act-character of God's reality leads us to confess that, in revelation, God is "not so much *there* as rather that he *comes*."¹¹ Revelation gives itself to human beings like the manna came to the Israelites in the wilderness: "it does not let itself be saved up" (Ex. 16:19–20). With each new day – indeed, "in every moment" – God's Word is given to us as something divinely new, as sheer miracle.¹² Barth is evidently worried that unless revelation is understood in terms of unconditioned divine acts, then God's self-giving is destined to become a mere predicate of something other than God himself. Were this to happen, God would cease to be the gracious and free giver of revelation; he would instead be at the mercy of that which conditions *him* – be it nature, history, or experience. "Otherwise," he says, "God could not be distinguished from a hidden feature of reality as such. He could not be distinguished from fate."¹³

While I can certainly appreciate Barth's motivating concern, I nevertheless feel compelled to raise questions – just as Bonhoeffer did – about whether Barth's proposed solution to this danger does not result in an over-compensation. More specifically, we must ask whether Barth's divine actualism, though influential and insightful in many respects, stresses divine excess and transcendence to the point of obscuring the hermeneutic contexts wherein such divine disclosure appears. In his zeal to protect the sovereignty of divine revelation from the grasp of human epistemic presumption, Barth arguably fails to appreciate the ways in which God reveals himself in and through immanent horizons of manifestation. The infinity of Barth's vertical orientation effaces the horizontal plane, and as a result the *historicity* and *sociality* of revelation – and of human beings in the midst of

⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

¹¹ Ibid. (emphasis added).

¹² Ibid., 41.

¹³ Ibid., 40.

revelation – is undertheorized. Therefore, Barth’s divine actualism, while rightly stressing that revelation is a transcendent gift from God, still requires hermeneutic pruning in order to help us theorize the socially- and historically-mediated structures at work in divinely revealed phenomena. In short, it must be made clear how divine revelation allows itself to become real in – i. e., mediated by – concrete human experience. With this goal in mind, we now turn to Bonhoeffer’s alternative conception of revelation, which I will argue advances beyond the Barthian position in a number of crucial respects.

2. Bonhoeffer: Revelation in the Form of “Christ Existing as Community”

2.1 Bonhoeffer’s Critique of Barth’s Divine Actualism

Though Bonhoeffer was deeply impressed by the profundity of Barth’s theological vision, he nonetheless worried that Barth’s actualism suffers from a number of defects. First and foremost, it betrays a deficient view of divine freedom. Bonhoeffer summarizes what he calls Barth’s “formal” conception of God’s freedom in the following way:

“God is free inasmuch as God is bound to nothing, not even the ‘existing,’ ‘historical’ Word. The Word as truly God’s is free. God can give or withhold the divine self according to absolute favor, remaining in either case free. Never is God at the disposal of human beings; it is God’s glory that, in relation to everything given and conditional, God remains utterly free, unconditioned.”¹⁴

Even in the event of revelation, for Barth, God is not bound to history; consequently, divine revelation is a passing act – “with all the instability,” Barth says elsewhere, “of a deed being done right now.”¹⁵

Bonhoeffer was concerned that even though Barth readily employs temporal categories (event, moment, instant, now, etc.), his conception of God’s revelatory act is “essentially supratemporal.”¹⁶ For it appears that revelation lacks any continuity through time: like a streak of lightning which pierces the night sky, dazzling us in its brilliance – and then is gone. To be sure, according to Barth we may, and indeed *should*, be confident that God’s word will strike us again: the word of the Lord shall not return void. Yet, even so, Bonhoeffer could not shake his suspicion – a suspicion which I share – that Barth has in the final analysis failed to account for the gracious *continuity* of God’s presence in Jesus Christ.¹⁷ Secondly, Bonhoeffer also charges that the “conceptual nexus” which undergirds

¹⁴ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, edited by Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., translated by H. Martin Rumscheidt (DBWE 2), Minneapolis 1996, 82.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83. Bonhoeffer quotes from *Karl Barth, Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf. Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik*, Munich 1927, 295.

¹⁶ *Bonhoeffer, Act and Being*, 84.

¹⁷ This is not the place to explore the varying stages and alterations of Barth’s theological development. I only wish to signal to my reader that I am not unaware of Barth’s later “change of direction” (*Wendung*), which enabled him to speak of the *humanity* of God in a manner that would have made his younger self quite skeptical. Cf. *Karl*

Barth's account of revelation is conceived "individualistically."¹⁸ For if Barth's actualism is correct, it is unclear – phenomenologically speaking – what binds God to me apart from his momentary acts of self-disclosure and my corresponding individual acts of faith.

2.2 Bonhoeffer's Alternative: Revelation in the form of Christ Existing as Community

For these reasons, Bonhoeffer chose to go in a different direction when articulating revelation's "how." In place of Barth's formal conception of divine freedom, Bonhoeffer advances a "substantial" one:

"In revelation it is not so much a question of the freedom of God – eternally remaining within the divine self, aseity – on the other side of revelation, as it is of God's coming out of God's own self in revelation. It is a matter of God's *given* Word, the covenant in which God is bound by God's own action. It is a question of the freedom of God, which finds its strongest evidence precisely in that God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings and to be placed at the disposal of human beings. God is free not from human beings but for them ... Here the formal understanding of God's freedom is countered by a substantial one."¹⁹

Bonhoeffer here concurs with Barth that divine revelation is not a static being that transcends time. But neither is it a series of discontinuous divine acts, as Barth had thought. Rather, revelation is "haveable" or "graspable" within history as God freely gives himself to be known in and through "Christ existing as community."²⁰ God is truly present in this form – not in any "strictly momentary" way, but in a historically continuous way. As Bonhoeffer says, "revelation is somehow held fast here. God's freedom has woven itself into this personlike community of faith, and it is precisely this which manifests what God's freedom is: that God binds God's self to human beings."²¹

This alternative conception of revelation improves upon Barth's in several ways. Bonhoeffer tries to rectify Barth's suprahistorical and individualist tendencies by construing revelation as God's way of freely conditioning *himself*, both historically and socially, to be present "suprapersonally [*überpersönlich*] through a community of persons."²² As he says, "God wills that all God's revelation, both in Christ and in the church, be concealed under the form of historical life."²³ Invoking the language of divine acts even as he appropriates it for his own purposes, Bonhoeffer further claims that "it is a *Christian insight that God uses the social nature of human beings in order to act among them in every respect. God acts in history*; thus God's claim is mediated for us, essentially and primarily, by other

Barth, *The Humanity of God*, translated by John Newton Thomas, Louisville, KY 1960, 37–38. Suffice it to say that we are not at present concerned with the subtle distinctions between the theologies of the early and later Barth, but rather with Bonhoeffer's view of him in the writings under examination and especially with the nature of the theological disagreement between them.

¹⁸ Ibid., 124.

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 90–91.

²⁰ Ibid., 91.

²¹ Ibid., 112.

²² Ibid., 114.

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Clifford J. Green (Ed.), Minneapolis 1998, 126.

people, and is bound to sociality.”²⁴ The emphasis, for Bonhoeffer, therefore falls not upon God’s transcendent non-giveness – i. e., God’s freedom *from* us – but on God’s immanent givenness – i. e., God’s freedom *for* us.

A decisive implication follows from this emphasis, one having to do with how we experience God in our daily lives. Since, for Bonhoeffer, revelation is “Christ existing as community,” and more importantly since God’s presence *in, through, and as* this community is mediated by the persons who comprise it – by those who, to use the language of Paul the Apostle, are members of Christ’s body – then it follows that such persons are mediators of Christ to one another, i. e., the very presence of Christ *hic et nunc*. Bonhoeffer, in an effort to draw out this implication, declares that “every member of the church may and should ‘become a Christ’ to the others.”²⁵ This “becoming a Christ” to each other mediates Christ’s presence to us in time and space. It is, furthermore, the primary means by which God reveals himself to us today – the site where divine self-disclosure takes place.²⁶

We are now in a better position to understand just what Bonhoeffer means when he asserts that God is “haveable” or “graspable” in “Christ existing as community.” He means, quite literally, that in and through the mortal hands of Christ’s mediators, the immortal presence of God in Christ touches us; that without ceasing to be who we are, you and I also mysteriously become Christ’s bodily presence to one another here on earth. Between I and Thou, God is at work: the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. We must not fail to appreciate the two-fold way in which God makes himself “graspable” in this form. Not only does God take hold of *us* through other persons who “become Christ” to us, but we too are the personal instruments through whom God takes hold of *others*. We must understand ourselves, in other words, as both *beneficiaries* as well as *benefactors* of revelation – those to whom Christ has come and those through whom Christ goes out to others. Divine revelation is, in short, both a gift (*Gabe*) and a task (*Aufgabe*).²⁷ (I will return to this point below).

I submit that Bonhoeffer’s most crucial insights into divine revelation lie here: in our participation in revelation through our “being-in-Christ” (*in Christus sein*). Barth had correctly seen that revelation happens *to us*, that in the event of divine self-giving God places us in the accusative case: we are those to whom God says, “Sinner, I forgive *you*.” It here becomes visible that revelation occurs *extra nos* (outside of us). Yet Bonhoeffer adds this crucial point, which Barth risks obscuring: that revelation also happens *per nos* (through us), that within “Christ existing as community” God empowers us to speak in the vocative case. We become those through whom God says to others, “*Sinner*, you are forgiven!”

²⁴ Ibid., 55.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 113.

²⁶ Thus Christiane Tietz: “Christ is present in Christian community. Bonhoeffer thereby coined the famous formula: the church is ‘Christ existing as community.’ Jesus Christ is encountered by human beings in the church, in the sermon and sacraments, and in the neighbor in whose love I encounter Christ. For those who do not live in Jesus’ time – that is, for us – there is no longer any other possibility of encountering Christ today.” Cf. *Christiane Tietz*, *Theologian of Resistance. The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Minneapolis 2016, 11.

²⁷ I am once again referring to, and adapting, a point Bonhoeffer makes in another context. He introduces the distinction between gifts (*Gaben*) and tasks (*Aufgaben*) in his discussion of our duties to one another in his *Ethics* manuscript “Natural Life.” Of central importance, for my argument here, is that “God gives before God demands.” *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, *Ethics*, Clifford J. Green (Ed.), Minneapolis 2005, 180.

With this correction, the entire problematic of “how” revelation gives itself to us is transformed. It becomes clear that divine revelation occurs amidst a certain hermeneutic we-structure inasmuch as it gives itself to us through others, and to others through us. Revelation is thereby mediated in and through Christ's members – i. e., in and through you and me, frail and flawed though we are.

Yet where, we must ask, does this divine life and activity become visible in our experience with others? How do we know, phenomenologically speaking, when we have experienced God together in this way? In other words, what does “becoming a Christ” look like in our relationships with one another? Answering these interrelated questions requires that we investigate the hermeneutic we-structures that organize our life together (*gemeinsames Leben*)²⁸ in the midst of “Christ existing as community” (*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*). Then it will become clear what kinds of embodied tasks are gathered together within this hermeneutic structure, i. e., how divine revelation is at work “through us” (*per nos*) – something to be lived into, a way of life.

2.3 A Hermeneutic of Divine Revelation: Being “with” and “for” Each Other in Christ

We must, therefore, try to decipher what all of this entails concretely. Toward this end, we will examine the two hermeneutic structures which Bonhoeffer claims are constitutive of this revelatory community: (1) being “with” each other and (2) being “for” each other. Doing so will then allow us to see how these structures, which coincide with divine revelation itself, bear fruit in our daily lives with one another. We must note, from the very beginning, that this community of persons who are “in Christ” – i.e., who mediate Christ to one another – constitute what Bonhoeffer calls a “community of love” (*Liebesgemeinschaft*). This is determinative for all that follows. Everything said below is, quite simply, a variation on this one theme. Love is that which ties the community together, animates its spirit, and motivates the deeds of its members. On account of love, the members of this community are structurally “with” and “for” each other.

In other words, this being-with and being-for are the two hermeneutic structures that constitute “Christ existing as community.” In Bonhoeffer's own words,

“This can be summarized in two groups of thought: (1) *Church-community and church member being structurally ‘with-each-other’ [Miteinander] as appointed by God* and (2) *the member's active ‘being-for-each-other’ [Füreinander] and the principle of vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung].*”²⁹

This being “with-each-other” and “for-each-other” are instituted by God in revelation and reflect the very being of Christ himself. We are structurally with and for each other because Christ – in whom we live, move, and have our being – is with and for us; and by virtue of our membership in Christ's body and our participation in God's life and activity through this body, we are with and for each other as well. As Bonhoeffer puts it, “The church-community is so structured that wherever one of its members is, there too is the church-

²⁸ This, of course, being the title of Bonhoeffer's popular devotional work “Life Together” (1939).

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 178.

community in its power, which means in the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit.”³⁰ Or, we could say that this love – and the being-with and being-for that it engenders – is not something produced or manufactured by the community or its members. Rather, each person “in Christ” is first and foremost conditioned by this love: drawn into this Christ-reality (*Christuswirklichkeit*),³¹ empowered by this divine Spirit, and made to be a participant in this way of life.

Crucially, for Bonhoeffer, these hermeneutic structures are not fixed or static, having no bearing on our lived experience. Instead, they manifest themselves quite tangibly in certain “concrete acts” (*konkreten Akte*), i. e., in “the social acts [*sozialen Akte*] that constitute the community of love and that disclose in more detail the structure and nature of the Christian church.”³² In a sort of repetition of Barth’s actualism, Bonhoeffer here underscores that our being-in-Christ empowers acts of love which *we* perform as Christ’s representatives. As Bonhoeffer says: “Whoever lives in love is Christ in relation to the neighbor.”³³ These acts, it must be noted, are quite different from the unconditioned and formally free divine acts narrated by Barth. They are, instead, thoroughly conditioned and substantively free, mediated in history and sociality, and structured by our embodied being “with” and “for” each other. Yet such acts are still *God’s* acts, performed in and through us.

Yet what, exactly, are the nature of the actions that correspond to these two hermeneutic structures? First, Bonhoeffer points out that our being “with-each-other” in Christ “goes beyond the ordinary sense of ‘being-with-one-another.’”³⁴ For this is a being-with that leads us to bear one another’s burdens and sufferings in imitation of Christ himself: “It must come to the point that the weaknesses, needs, and sins of my neighbor afflict me as if they were my own, in the same way as Christ was afflicted by our sins.” Even in the loneliness of my being-toward-death, I am not alone: “When I come to die, I should be confident that not I, or at least not I alone, am dying, but that Christ and the community of saints are suffering and dying with me. We walk the path of suffering and death accompanied by the whole church.”³⁵ While each of us must, in death, “face God singly and alone,” the church-community is still present with us. Thus “in every situation and problem of life *the church-community* [i. e., Christ himself as this community] *is with this individual*.”³⁶ For “where the church-community is, there is Christ.”³⁷

As for the second hermeneutic structure, which is already entailed by the first, here too our being “for-each-other” becomes “actualized through acts of love.”³⁸ More specifically, according to Bonhoeffer, there are three great possibilities of acting for each other within the community of saints: “[1] *self-renouncing, active work for the neighbor*; [2]

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 58

³² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 178.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 180.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. (emphasis original).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 184.

intercessory prayer; and, finally, [3] *the mutual forgiveness of sins* in God's name."³⁹ All three kinds of action involve my giving up myself for my neighbor's benefit – "with the readiness to do and bear everything in the neighbor's place, indeed, if necessary, to sacrifice myself, standing as a *substitute* for my neighbor."⁴⁰ Particularly the latter sort of act is what Bonhoeffer means by "vicarious representative action" (*Stellvertretung*). While perhaps rare in itself, it is nevertheless entailed in every genuine act of love.⁴¹ By means of self-renouncing, active work for my neighbor, I put all of my possessions, honor, and the entirety of my strength toward the end of helping my neighbor, whose good is my utmost concern. Through intercessory prayer, I shed my self-righteousness and mistaken individualism, which treats prayer as a "pious work." When I intercede on my neighbor's behalf, the boundary between us breaks down: I belong to you. And finally, by means of the forgiveness of sins, I take your sin from your dirty conscience and bear it: "Nobody can forgive sins but the person who takes them upon himself, bears them and wipes them out. Thus only Christ can do it, which for us means his church as the *sanctorum communio*."⁴² With priestly authority by virtue of my membership in "Christ existing as community," I give you my ear, hear of your sins, bear them for you – no matter how vile or wretched – and wipe them out by laying them on Christ and declaring them forgiven. I free you from yourself, from your guilt and despair and loneliness; I possess the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and, behold, I open its gates for you; I love you, as only God can love you.

All of this is possible because the church-community, and we as its members, is "the present Christ himself" (*der gegenwärtige Christus selbst*).⁴³ As Bonhoeffer explains,

"The community of faith really does have the word of forgiveness at its disposal. In the community of faith the words 'I am forgiven' can be spoken not merely existentially; as the Christian church, the congregation may declare in sermon and sacrament that 'you are forgiven.' Through such proclamation of the gospel, every member of the church may and should 'become a Christ' to the others."⁴⁴

God has woven himself into and put himself at the disposal of, this personlike community of faith. God is living and active here, in our being with and for each other. In sundry ways, we incarnate God's love: "Our actions are the actions of members of the body of Christ, that is, they possess the power of the love of Christ, through which each may and ought to become a Christ to the other."⁴⁵ These hermeneutic structures organize our lives together, inform how we see and treat one another, and determine how we are given to each other – and, most crucially, how God gives himself to us – in divine revelation.⁴⁶

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 189.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 190.

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 113.

⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 182–183.

⁴⁶ For Bonhoeffer, these structures can only be understood as "hermeneutic" because they determine how we are given to each other and thus how we see and treat one another: as mediated by Christ, as gift, friend, helper, etc. Bonhoeffer contrasts this with the alternative way in which we can be given to one another and thus see and treat each other: as mediated by Adam, as law, antagonist, stranger, etc.

3. Conclusion

We have descended, step by step, from the vast heights of Barth's vertical orientation to the immanent hermeneutic structures at work in revelation, and even more concretely to the loving actions which manifest our being with and for each other in Christ. Divine revelation, is not just, or even mostly, about recounting God's past mighty deeds; it is also, perhaps *chiefly*, about our daily deeds of love, prayer, and forgiveness (unassuming though they might at first appear). It has been my intention to show that none of these daily deeds are, in fact, insignificant; none of them should be overlooked or discounted as somehow irrelevant to an understanding of revelation. For Bonhoeffer, such acts are not mere after-effects of divine revelation but are themselves historical manifestations of revelation, which expresses itself in and through these concrete human phenomena. I contend that Bonhoeffer helps us see that revelation has a horizontal, just as much as a vertical, dimension. He reminds us that revelation is uncannily close to us – as close as our neighbor, as close as community. Drawing on his profound insights, I have tried to illuminate this horizontal dimension of revelation: the places where God is manifested here and now, in the midst of history, and in the fleshly encounters between human beings.

What this means is that revelation is both a gift (*Gabe*) and a task (*Aufgabe*). It is first and foremost a gift insofar as Christ and his church-community are with and for us unconditionally – insofar as *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. In this respect, it is correct to say that God's love for us is indeed completely unconditioned by anything outside of God himself: absolutely nothing – not history, not time, not space, not experience, not anything – can separate us from the gift that is God's love. Yet this glorious truth must not allow us to forget that God's love is no less a task. Revelation puts us to work, and sets us on a mission, for precisely this reason: because the same God who is unconditionally with and for us in Christ wants to *condition* our entire existence in time in space. In short, God desires that we embody this being-with and being-for in our daily dealings with one another – in our “becoming a Christ” to each other. The God who is with and for us in Christ will surely be with and for us through Christ's members. For by means of these members, Christ himself demonstrates that he is really (*wirklich*) with us, that the Word really has become flesh and dwelt among us.

My paper reexamines a dispute between Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer over the issue of divine revelation. In the paper's first section, I examine Barth's actualistic account of divine revelation, which provides us with an initial point of entry into the problematic of revelation. The second section of the paper then explores how Bonhoeffer attempts to improve upon Barth's position by construing revelation as mediated by history and human sociality within the church-community. In so doing, I argue, Bonhoeffer puts us in a better position to develop a hermeneutics of divine revelation that speaks to contemporary issues in theological epistemology.