Ecclesiology and Theodicy: Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* as Response to Human Suffering

Dr. Maury Jackson
Associate Professor of Practical Theology
H.M.S. Richards Divinity School
La Sierra University, Riverside, California[1]

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[1] Jackson earned his DMin from Claremont School of Theology, CA; his MA from California State University, Los Angeles; and his MDiv from Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI. He has served as pastor on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. His several published works include: "Shepherding Public Discourse Practices: Homiletic Form Aligned to the Logic Operative in Racial Rhetoric and Public Theological Discourse for Secular Liberal Democracies," *Cultural and Religious Studies* 4, no. 9 (September 2016); "Causality Principle as the Framework to Contextualize Time in Modern Physics," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 5, no. 6 (June 2016), 1–22; "Moral Education and the Adventist Print Media," *Adventist Today* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2014), 12–17; "When Anger Heals:A Christian Response to the Global Healthcare Debate," *Adventist Today* 21, no. 1 (Winter, 2013), 04–09; "The Heresy Tertullian Overlooked: On Prescription against the Apologist's Use of Rhetoric," *Spes Christiana* 22–23 (2011–2012), 15–30; "Sketching an Adventist Vision for Global Mission" *Adventist Today* 20, no. 2 (March–April, 2012), 16–19; and "Answering the Call for a Sacred Conversation on Race," *Spectrum Magazine* 36, no. 3 (Summer, 2008), 42–50. See https://lasierra.edu/divinity and mjackson@lasierra.edu.

Introduction

The final sentence in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation reads as follows: "In the community of love and in the unity of faith it [the church] endures and it knows 'that the *sufferings* of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to it.'"[2] However, while one might imagine based off of this quotation that the topic of suffering was an important theme in the rest of his work, a reader would be hard pressed to find any explicit discussion by him on "the sufferings of this present time." In fact, if one searches the subject index in the 2009 Fortress Press edition of *Sanctorum Communio*, they will be directed to only three reference entries for the word "suffering."[3] One of those refers not to Bonhoeffer's own words, but to the afterword written by Joachim von Soosten.[4] A second citation is to Bonhoeffer's discussion of "the punitive character of the suffering of Jesus," highlighting "Christ's action as vicarious representative" action, which secures the renewal of humanity.[5] The third and final entry comes in the middle of a section on the topic of the limitlessness of Christian love.[6] In this briefly extended section, Bonhoeffer discusses the theme of suffering in the context of the duty to share one another's burdens. To summarize, within a book of almost three hundred pages, Bonhoeffer manages to use only five pages to address explicitly the subject of suffering.

Despite the scarcity of the term "suffering" in the work, the concept itself is present, however implicitly, throughout his arguments. Not only does it provide the backdrop to Bonhoeffer's extensive essay, but it seems quite appropriate that it does. Suffering, after all, provides the backdrop to our daily existence. And wherever the matter of suffering is presented, all people—atheists, Christian apologists, religious philosophers, and misotheists—ask the question, "Why?" Sometimes this "why?" question is asked from the distance

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[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume I, Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 289. Emphasis mine.

[3] Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer Works*, 370.

[4] Bonhoeffer, 304. Soosten writes: "Who the neighbor is, the suffering other for whom Christians must care and whom they must defend, is determined solely by the One whom the Christian obediently follows in faith."

[5] Bonhoeffer, 155.

[6] Bonhoeffer, 179–182.

of a detached, often academic observer; however, philosophical arguments that achieve logical clarity typically miss the mark for those not afforded a reprieve from the very real angst of suffering. The way a person frames the question "why?" bespeaks that person's hopes for this life. For some who have surrendered to the contingency and chance of life, they simply ask, "Why me?" But for others, who believe that God is active, present, and participating (some might even say intervening) in our world, they ask, "Why God?" To suffer is both to be physically harmed and to experience an emotional wound. Those who suffer have the double effect of harm: they feel the injury, as well as the emotional hurt that accompanies it. To suffer, in short, is evil.[7] Can one justifiably believe in God's existence in the face of this evil?

In his work, I argue that Bonhoeffer shapes a Christian pastoral care response for those who are suffering, if not an answer for how to justify God's existence in the face of such evil. In what follows, I will 1) sketch how Bonhoeffer's theological method reframes the theodicy response by 2) exposing the primal rupture to human community and 3) discovering a principle latent in the community of sinners; that is, the principle of collective ethical action, which 4) God creatively employs in the redemptive work of Christ to institute God's will for the salvation of humanity. And in the end, all this is done in order to 5) provide a sacramental basis for the therapeutic ministry of the Church's pastoral office.

A. Theodicy and the Limits of Bonhoeffer's Theological Method

In this first section, in order to draw out the implicit theodic logic of Bonhoeffer's argument in *Sanctorum Communio*, I will attempt to show how he breaks with traditional Western philosophical approaches to theodicy. While traditional approaches to theodicy ask the question of how God can exist if evil exists, Bonhoeffer appears throughout his work to ask:

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[7] My colleague Reverend Dr. Matthew Burdette retorts that this strikes as too broad a statement. According to him, to suffer is to experience the actions of another without the freedom to say no: being a creature always involves suffering, since we are subject to powers greater than our ability to resist. He writes (in an email), "Is this evil? I am not sure. I think one can say, 'To suffer harm is to experience evil.' a person always suffers *something*. The thing may be evil, but I am not sure the reality of suffering is itself an evil." It might be helpful to remind ourselves of the philosophical distinction of natural evil from moral evil. For me, the evil *in* suffering is the evil *of* suffering: that we have this kind of existence. Only an ultimate response is a true theodic response to "suffering," in this since of the word.

"How does God act in the world to respond
to those who suffer evil?"

What will be shown is that Bonhoeffer's answer to that question "socializes" the problem: it is viewed as a problem that can only be responded to "by," "from," and "in" a communal context. In this way Bonhoeffer's response anticipates those clinical pastoral paradigms that recognize suffering in relationship to their communities.[8]

The therapeutic ministry of the pastor has drawn heavily from the cognate discipline of psychology;[9] this has occurred to such a great extent that one could wonder whether theological curriculum should include more courses in psychology. While some might view this suggestion with suspicion, others, like John Cobb Jr., view this trend more charitably. In his postscript to a debate on theodicy by four of his faculty colleagues, Cobb writes:

> One reason pastors have turned to psychology for help in answering (or not answering) the question, Why?, is that most theologians give them no help…. I am astounded—and somewhat put off—by the audacity of philosophers … who undertake to tell us what God was thinking before there was a world! I would prefer that pastors not take their cue from that.[10]

Yet it is debatable to what extent one should draw from the cognate discipline of psychology in pastoral theology. Such a method appears problematic when the question arises as to how much should individuals' specific experiences inform theological reflection.[11] To the extent that pastoral studies assist in this conversation between theology and human experience, one must evaluate whether to place the emphasis on the tradition or contemporary experience. Bonhoeffer appears to anticipate this challenge, and yet he does so by trying to reframe the purpose of Christian theology in a way that makes it more

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[8] My colleague Marlene Ferreras directed my attention to the work of Sharon Thornton: "People suffer in relationship to communities, not apart from them," in Sharon G. Thornton's *Broken Yet Beloved*: *A Pastoral Theology of the Cross* (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2002), 127.

[9] This very trend in the therapeutic sources that modern pastors draw from has been challenged by Thomas C. Oden, *Kerygma and Counseling: Toward a Covenant Ontology for Secular Psychotherapy* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966).

[10] John B. Cobb, Jr., "The Problem of Evil and the Task of Ministry" in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 173.

[11] Gordon Lynch, "The Relationship between Pastoral Counseling and Pastoral Theology" in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd, 2000), 228.

practically relevant. He undertakes this reframing by placing ecclesiology at the center of the system. What does the presence of Christ, existing as the community of the Church, mean for the justification of God's existence in the face of evil? In other words, does being a person in the body of Christ reconstruct our experiencing? Is the Christ-community a healing salve or is it more of a social placebo when it comes to providing any curative to the world's suffering, let alone providing any answers to the problem of evil?

This might be the best way to form a working question for any treatment of the theme of theodicy in the broader work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. That is, of course, if it is even possible to trace an explicit theme. Obviously his dissertation did not address some abstract treatment of "the problem of evil" (in general), nor did he address concerns about individual angst with suffering. In his own words, the problem he is directly concerned with is "the problem of a specifically Christian social philosophy and sociology."[12] Bonhoeffer breaks with a longstanding tradition in religious thinking when it comes to the question of theodicy. After all, he wrote explicitly,

> The question of why evil exists is not a theological question, for it assumes that it is possible to go behind the existence forced upon us as sinners…. The theological question does not arise about the origin of evil but about the real overcoming of evil on the Cross; it asks for the forgiveness of guilt, for the reconciliation of the fallen world.[13]

This statement appears to contradict the ordinary Western philosophical position that, for example, the philosopher of religion Stephen T. Davis advocates, who argues that "the problem of evil is a problem for *theism*."[14] For Davis and others like him, theological methodology can and must conjecture beyond the point of our broken condition and inquire after the possibilities available to God in the divine eternity.

It appears that, unlike Davis and according to Bonhoeffer, our sinful existence functions like the point of singularity in big-bang

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[12] Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer Works*, 22.

[13] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall Temptation: Two Biblical Studies* (New York: Collier Books, 1959), 76.

[14] Stephen T. Davis, ed. *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 2.

cosmology; that is, theological method breaks down or dissolves into speculation prior to the fallen human condition. We don't have the tools for any methodology to go behind our fallenness? On the face of it, Bonhoeffer's statement about the existence of evil suggests that our job is not to ask the "why?" question, but to act for good in light of the reality of God's mission, revealed in the Christ-community. One may wonder whether this response to the problem of evil is an avoidance strategy, one that would disqualify Bonhoeffer from being counted among the various protest theodicies.[15] Rather than trying to make explicit theoretical sense of the problem, Bonhoeffer presents the church as the divine therapeutic curative for the problem of suffering in our fallen world. However, Bonhoeffer's response does suggest an implicit theological reasoning about suffering.

In an effort to draw out the logic of his implicit theodicy, it is helpful to lay out (in table form) how different approaches to theodicy correspond to an implicit sacramental image and so an implied therapeutic curative.[16] For example, if the response to the problem of evil is to claim that God has a perfect plan, then the sacramental image can be modeled as imagining that we live in a world shared with the Lord of nature and history, which implies a therapy for the one who experiences suffering of remembrance: bringing back to mind that God is in control. The passage from Isaiah 46:9–11 informs the curative like a pharmacopeia, as seen in the following table.[17]

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[15] Cf. Claire Messud, *The Emperor's Children* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 457.

[16] As noted to me privately by my friend and colleague, Reverend Dr. Matthew Burdette, the word sacramental used here, more accurately, suggests an implicit construal of the God/world relationship.

[17] I am aware that the notion of "therapeutic curative" is problematic. I am using it in an ordinary and not in the technical sense of the term. I am also aware that pastoral care goes beyond Seward Hiltner's concepts of "healing, sustaining, and guiding." Again, healing is only one of the multiple ways of naming and providing pastoral caring responses. See, Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology: The Ministry and Theory of Shepherding* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958).

Table 1. 6 Typology of Approaches to Theodicy[18]

Title of Response	6 Types of Responses		
	Sacramental Image	Therapeutic Curative	Bible Text
Perfect Plan	Lord of Nature/History	God's in Control	Is 46:9–11
Freewill Defense	Good and Bad Apples	Cooperate with God	Josh 24:15
Soul Making	The Vine Pruner	God's not finished: Yet	1 John 3:2
Open Theism	His Eye is on the Sparrow	God's responsive Love	1 John 4:8
Finite Theism	God/world Interdepend	Involve not Intervene	Gen 1:26
Protest Theodicies	"My God, Why Have…"	Challenge God	Amos 7:3

All this has been said to make note of how difficult it is to trace the theme of theodicy in Bonhoeffer's collected works. It is even more difficult to trace this theme specifically in *Sanctorum Communio*. Nevertheless, given the fact that Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who coined the term theodicy, wrestled with some of the same questions and issues that Bonhoeffer takes up in his dissertation, we may find some reason to continue an investigation into Bonhoeffer's theodic intuitions.[19] In many ways, Bonhoeffer does not fit neatly into the standard types of theodic answers, and yet he draws from each of them to some degree. For instance, he insists on identifying the will as necessary for the dignity of the human person, [20] and so one could be tempted to view his approach to theodicy as a species of the freewill defense. Yet he also insists on both the reality and the actualizing fulfillment of the sovereign

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[18] The creation of this table was inspired, in part, by the book written by Richard Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning: Contemporary Responses to the Problem of Pain* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014).

[19] In Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's Part One of his *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God and the Freedom of Man in the Origin of Evil* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015, 1st 2005) writes: "Having so settled the rights of faith and of reason as rather to place reason at the service of faith than in opposition to it, we shall see how they exercise these rights to support and harmonize what the light of nature and the light of revelation teach us of God and of man in relation to evil. The difficulties are distinguishable into two classes. The one kind springs from man's freedom, which appears incompatible with the divine nature; and nevertheless freedom is deemed necessary, in order that man may be deemed guilty and open to punishment. The other kind concerns the conduct of God, and seems to make him participate too much in the existence of evil, even though man be free and participate also therein. And this conduct appears contrary to the goodness, the holiness and the justice of God, since God co-operates in evil as well physical as moral, and co-operates in each of them both morally and physically; and since it seems that these evils are manifested in the order of nature as well as in that of grace, and in the future and eternal life as well, nay, more than, in this transitory life."

See www.philvaz.com/apologetics/LeibnizBestPossibleWorldTheodicy.pdf.

[20] Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer Works*, 67; 80ff.

purposes of God in the new humanity,[21] which might tempt us to view his approach to theodicy as a species of the perfect plan vision. Whatever theodic vision we are able to draw from Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*, it would be an error in judgment if we fail to recognize that Bonhoeffer's vision is not derived from the usual Western approach to theological method, which exhibits that particular "audacity of philosophers … who undertake to tell us what God was thinking before there was a world!"[22]

Having explored Bonhoeffer's unique approach to theodicy and its demand for a communal therapeutic response to suffering, I will now turn to how he employs the theological symbols of sin and "the Fall" in order to provide an adequate anthropological and sociological account of the empirical phenomena that can inform a social philosophy.

B. Primal Rupture, Collective Persons and the Principle of Vicarious Representation

In this section, in order to draw out the implicit theodic logic of Bonhoeffer's argument in *Sanctorum Communio*, I will first offer an exposition of his understanding of sin, the only category that explains the radical social rupture resulting in individual disaster. Secondly, I will show how Bonhoeffer employs this theological symbol "sin" to interpret the phenomena we witness in our shared human condition. It soon becomes apparent that the biological concept of the species is inadequate and unable to define the moral and spiritual dimensions of human experience. Bonhoeffer includes these dimensions and the individual and social phenomena arising from them in his more adequate theological definition of the human species. This account of the entire species contends for a version of humanity that includes its personal and social expression. Adam, in short, is both collective and individual.

Pursuing the theme of theodicy in Bonhoeffer's theological study of the sociology of the Church displays how the dominant Western approach to theodicy may be misguided, and for this reason: framing the problem abstractly, generally, even simply as "the problem of

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[21] Bonhoeffer, 165.

[22] John B. Cobb, Jr., "The Problem of Evil and the Task of Ministry" in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 173.

evil," that can be addressed by any lone thinker outside of the community. Bonhoeffer's investigation precludes this approach from the start; it is not that simple. An individual cannot wrestle with the question of theodicy apart from a communal cry. Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* reframes the problem. His concern is not the problem of evil *per se*, but "the problem of a Christian sociology."[23] According to Bonhoeffer, Christian faith requires commitment to certain beliefs about the nature of community, which stand in opposition to established values and beliefs in sociological epistemology. Bonhoeffer's concerns address the problem of evil indirectly—which may be the only way to address it. The problem comes at an awkward angle through the reality that is forced upon us.

What is that reality? For Bonhoeffer, it is the reality of sin, which he describes as "utmost solitude," "radical separation," or the "isolated position" that each person comes to recognize.[24] Bonhoeffer describes "original sin" as a "rupture," "fall," and "separation"[25] where what was lost was community with God and others. This community with God defines our primal community where our individual identities are secure. We must not forget that, for Bonhoeffer, social community is the primal community; that is, the human person always already presumes a community. Moreover, in Bonhoeffer's system, the primal community is not the subject of protology, but of eschatology: it is not a subject of speculation about origins, but one of sustaining a future hope.[26] In light of this, Bonhoeffer draws a strong contrast between, on the one hand, the person-concept of the primal human state and, on the other hand, the person-concept of fallen humanity, i.e., the one "who does not live in

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[23] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume I Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 32, carrying over from fn. 3 on p. 30.

[24] Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer Works*, 145.

[25] Bonhoeffer, 61.

[26] Bonhoeffer, 64–65: "Thus we have sketched the archetype of the church. While the theological problem presents little difficulty, *the methodological issues become more complicated by relating social philosophy and sociology* to the doctrine of the primal state. Here, too, it cannot be a matter of developing speculative theories about the possibility of social being in the primal state not affected by evil will. Instead, methodologically, all statements are possible only on the basis of our understanding of the church, i.e., from the revelation we have heard. Thus social-philosophical and sociological problems can be dealt with in the context of theology not because they can be proved generally necessary on the basis of creation, but because they are presupposed and included in revelation."

unbroken community with God and humanity, but who knows good and evil."[27] The dependent clause, "but who knows good and evil," indicates how acute the challenge is of addressing the theodicy problem in *Sanctorum Communio,* or in any of Bonhoeffer's works.

Initially, it appears that Bonhoeffer has gone back on his claim that we cannot know humanity prior to the fall, that he is, as it were, inquiring after that for which he lacks the tools of inquiry. He appears to speak of a primal human state "behind the existence forced upon us as sinners," which would open the door to questions of how one can justify the existence of God in the face of evil. According to Bonhoeffer, our fallen state came as a result of our knowledge of evil: to live in the fallen state is to be broken from community with God and humanity as a result of knowing good and evil.[28] This suggests that theodic concerns emerge with a certain epistemological rupture that occurred at the fall. This is not "before" the fall nor "after" the fall; what "contemporaneously occurs" constitutes what he seems to mean by "fall."

What further rescues his argument is his claim that the doctrine of the primal state belongs to the study of eschatology and not to the study of protology. In speaking of the doctrine of the primal state, Bonhoeffer writes: "In the logic of theology as a whole it belongs with eschatology."[29] In this way he does not go "behind the existence forced upon us as sinners," rather he embraces it, writing that "The doctrine of the primal state is hope projected backward."[30] Living in hope is not to go "behind the existence forced upon us as sinners," but it is to work within it.

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27 Bonhoeffer, 44.

28 Bonhoeffer has more to say on this subject in *Creation and Fall* where he writes, "*Imago dei*—Godlike man in his existence for God and neighbor, in his primitive creatureliness and limitation; *sicut deus*—Godlike man in his out-of-himself knowledge of good and evil, in his limitlessness and his acting out-of-himself, in his underived existence, in his loneliness. *Imago dei*—that is, man bound to the Word of the Creator and living from him; *sicut deus*—that is, man bound to the depths of his own knowledge about God, in good and evil; *imago dei*—the creature living in obedience; *sicut deus*—the creator-man living out of the division of good and evil." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1–3* (New York: Collier Books, 1959), 71.

29 Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer Works*, 58.

30 Bonhoeffer, 60–61.

When Bonhoeffer seeks out the ways that the *peccatorum communio* (community of sinners)[31] can inform/be formed-into the *sanctorum communio* (community of saints), he uncovers the recalcitrance of this reality of sin that is forced upon us. He writes: "The reality of sin and the *communio peccatorum* remain even in God's church-community; Adam has really been replaced by Christ only eschatologically, επ ελπιδι (in spe) [in hope]. So long as sin remains, the whole of sinful humanity also remains in every human being."[32] This universality of sinful humanity is key to Bonhoeffer's interpretation of original sin.

In addressing original sin, Bonhoeffer ties individual culpability with the universality of sin, but he does not do so through a biological inheritance. In this way, he is able to preserve the dignity of humankind. He writes:

> When the human race is understood by means of the biological concept of the species, the ethical gravity of the concept of culpability is weakened. We must thus discover a Christian-ethical concept of the species. The issue is how to understand the human species in terms of the concept of sin."[33]

Here Bonhoeffer suggests that sin defines the Christian faith's theological anthropology. This anthropology strangely relates the individual with the social, and yet it honors the dignity of the human person by holding the individual accountable. Original sin displays a theological anthropology in which there is no stand-alone human individual, and yet this universality does not mean the erasure of discrete individuals. Bonhoeffer notes, "The human being, by virtue of being an individual, is also the human race.… Thus all humanity falls with each sin, and not one of us is in principle different from Adam; that is, everyone is also the 'first' sinner."[34]

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[31] It is reasonable at this point to ask, if sin is isolating, how is there a community of sinners? Clearly, from his quote on page 213, no easy answer can be given: "Among human beings there is no such thing as a pure, organic community life." 1) One might argue that here lies the paradox of being in Adam: each member warring against the others, and being bound together in mutual hatred, 2) one might argue that the grace of God allows for the remnants of genuine community to exist under sin (albeit in a fractured way), or 3) one might argue that when he speaks of a community of sinners, Bonhoeffer uses the word community loosely to stand for a society of sinners.

[32] Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer Works*, 124.

[33] Bonhoeffer, 111–113.

[34] Bonhoeffer, 115.

The individual's moral culpability presents to us the image of persons as "monads," in Leibniz's use of the word, who represent the race of people in a disturbing way.[35] Every person has sinned, and in that sin, each represents, in his or her person, that common human experience of fallenness. Because of the fall, our monadic existence is ruptured to the point that it even breeds a social and philosophical vision that is as distorted as our evil condition stands.[36] In other words, as broken monads our ideas are also fractured. What defines the species of humanity as a whole, finally, is the characteristic feature of belonging to that unique creation where individual moral agency involves the moral status of all others; individual moral culpability inescapably and morally implicates all others in the human community by uniquely deforming the ontic basic-relationship, imposing a radical separation between people. At this juncture, we see how our ontological rupture also rips at the epistemological level.

It is individual social atomism, the belief "that selves are encapsulated entities"[37] that is the primary antagonist in Bonhoeffer's understanding of the effects of original sin on epistemology.[38] The epistemological form of the primal rupture is manifested in philosophical atomism, which creates a conceptual chasm that cannot reconcile our ontological isolation with its very attempts to explain our isolation through a social philosophic construct. For a working definition of atomism, Brian Fay says it is the "thesis that the basic units of social life are self-contained, essentially independent, separated entities."[39] Fay frames the logical force of philosophical atomism by raising the question, "Do We Need Others To Be Ourselves?"[40] Atomism is a social philosophy that employs a kind of methodological individualism: "It accounts for social phenomena

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35 Bonhoeffer, 79. "Clearly, Leibniz's image of the monad may serve to clarify these social basic-relations. This is an image of individual beings who are completely self-contained—'monads have no windows'—and yet conceiving, mirroring, and individually shaping all of reality, and, in so doing, discovering their being."

36 Bonhoeffer, 116.

37 Brian Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science: A Multicultural Approach* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 47.

38 Fay, *Philosophy of Social Science*, 33.

39 Fay, 30.

40 Fay, 30.

ultimately in terms of individual acts and choices." [41] Yet, for Bonhoeffer, this philosophy distorts the distortion because it is only partially true. In fact, the universality of sin is an empirical phenomenon that precludes this sort of atomism; were this atomism true, sin would not be universal, but only afflict those individuals who willingly chose to sin.

Bonhoeffer prefers to speak about the human monad in such a way that the social and the personal are irreducibly implicated in each other. Nothing is prior to the social, including the knowledge of the individual subject. Bonhoeffer writes: "To attempt to derive the social from the epistemological category must be rejected as a μεταβασιζ ειζ αλλο γενοζ (change to a different category). It is impossible to reach the real existence of other subjects by way of the purely transcendental category of the universal." [42] According to Bonhoeffer, the reality of God is where one begins; the primal state is where we have unmediated community with God and humanity.[43] He writes, "Community with God by definition establishes social community as well."[44] According to Bonhoeffer, the problem with the various theories about social relations is that the concept of the divine relation to humanity embedded in them is problematic. The Aristotelian God is impersonal, the Stoic God is formal, the Epicurean God is utilitarian, and the Cartesian God is solipsistic.[45]

For Bonhoeffer, philosophical atomism is not simply a conceptual antagonist derived from an alternative sociological theory, it is theologically important to lay bare (or expose) the notions implied in the concept of philosophical atomism because: "*The concepts of person, community, and God* are inseparably and essentially related."[46] In short, Bonhoeffer's answer to the question of whether or not we need others to be ourselves is no and yes. We don't simply need "others" to be ourselves; we need a particular "Other" to

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[41] Fay, 31.

[42] Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer Works*, 45.

[43] Bonhoeffer, 63.

[44] Bonhoeffer, 63.

[45] Bonhoeffer, 36–41.

[46] Bonhoeffer, 34.

be ourselves, that is, to be ourselves we need God.[47] Because the concepts of person, community, and God are so interconnected, Christian theology must develop its own concept of the person that does not presume philosophical atomism. Personhood cannot be abstracted from community. And in order to understand the basic constituents of this community, Bonhoeffer sees it as necessary to discuss the subject of the human spirit, which he defines as "*the bond of self-consciousness and self-determination that documents its structural unity*; this spirit can be *formally defined as the principle of receptivity and activity*."[48] His definition requires another component, i.e., the function of human spirit, where he describes it as "effective in acts of thinking, self-conscious willing, and feeling."[49] So he writes: "The term 'Christian concept of person' will now be used for the concept of person that is constitutive for the concept of Christian community and is presupposed by it."[50] In Bonhoeffer's thinking, the concept of person already implies the concept of Christian community. Here, we begin to see his sacramental image emerge for an additional row to our table. Early in his dissertation, Bonhoeffer makes clear that he is not attempting to capture an empirical social realm in the human being, but is tracing the metaphysical or the philosophical precedents that are indispensable to any empirical account of social relations;[51] now we can see how the universality of sin implies an ethical solidarity with all sinful humanity, the collective fallen person, i.e., old Adam.

The notion of a collective person, in which all individual persons are in ethical solidarity, suggests a primitive concept of *the principle of vicarious representative action*. This principle implies that in addition to individual culpability, there can also be corporate culpability and that an individual or a group of individuals are able to act on behalf of a larger community. An understanding of this

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[47] Bonhoeffer, 80. "God does not desire a history of individual human beings, but the history of the human *community*. However, God does not want a community that absorbs the individual into itself, but a community of *human* beings. In God's eyes, community and individual exist in the same moment and rest in one another. The collective unit and the individual unit have the same structure in God's eyes."

[48] Bonhoeffer, 67.

[49] Bonhoeffer, 67.

[50] Bonhoeffer, 44.

[51] Bonhoeffer, footnotes on page 40 [#20] that continues to page 41.

principle is needed to make sense, for example, of Bonhoeffer's saying,

> The human being, by virtue of being an individual, is also the human race.… Thus all humanity falls with each sin, and not one of us is in principle different from Adam; that is, everyone is also the 'first' sinner.[52]

Bonhoeffer is able to speak of "the ethical personality of collective persons" and of the possibility of regarding "the collective person as an ethical person, that is, to place it in the concrete situation of being addressed by a you." [53] He supports this concept in a way that preserves the dignity of individuals and their moral choices. Paradoxically, despite ethical solidarity among all persons, he asserts that even at a time when the collective person comes under judgment, individuals can escape it. He writes:

> But this must not lead us to reject the very idea of judgment being passed on the collective person. We learned that the community as a collective person exists from God to God (see above) and that it must be conceived as being established through the will of God, and as such standing at the last judgment. This idea can also be found in the N.T. (Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum, Matt 11:21ff.; the address to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3, esp. 3:10 and 3:16). That God can condemn a collective person and at the same time accept individuals who are part of it, and vice versa, is an idea that is as necessary as it is incomprehensible.[54]

Bonhoeffer takes the time to illustrate that *the principle of vicarious representative action* is firmly established in the Holy Scriptures. Not only does Bonhoeffer support this idea of *the principle of vicarious representative action* in a way that honors the dignity of individuals and collective persons, he also supports the notion of corporate culpability by drawing on additional biblical images and metaphors. He refashions the Pauline image of fallen humanity as a corporate unit, calling it "humanity-in-Adam." He reinvokes the call of Israel to be the "people of God." He receives anew Isaiah's confession, "I am a person of unclean lips and dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." He recalls the words, of the divine messenger, in the story of the destruction of Sodom, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy them." Bonhoeffer's purpose for drawing on the biblical texts and imagery is

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[52] Bonhoeffer, 115.
[53] Bonhoeffer, 118.
[54] Bonhoeffer, 284.

to invite all, in the corporate Adam of the fall; that is, the community of sinners to hear that they are being addressed by the call of God for a new corporate humanity in the story of Jesus Christ.[55]

C. God's New Will and Purpose for Humanity: Sanctorum Communio

Only an ultimate response is a true theodic response to suffering. According to Bonhoeffer, the Church, as the divine reality, refashions collective humanity and therefore shows us what God intends for

1. The real (as opposed to the phenomenal) basic-relatedness of human beings;
2. The sociality of the human spirit, which is present before any act of an individual or group of individuals exercise their will(s) to be in community; and
3. The real (as opposed to phenomenal) ethical basic-relations that forms empirically existing communal relations.[56]

Due to how these concepts are modified in the new creation of God in the Church, we might now be able to use interchangeably the term "community of saints" with the notions "community-of-the-cross" and "community-of-God's-Realm" in order to provide insight into an assumed therapeutic curative implied in Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation.

Bonhoeffer writes that "God pledges to be present within the church-community."[57] He details the difference between what he calls the "empirical church" and what he calls the "essential church." Clifford Green notes, "It is clear that Bonhoeffer does not regard *Gemeinde* [the German word for local community] as a theological term for a Christocentric community and *Kirche* [the German word for church] as merely a sociological term for describing an empirical, religious institution."[58] While it is important to keep the concepts of the empirical and essential church distinct, they are nevertheless inseparable. This is because the church is one; there is only one church. The church is the one body of Christ. And for Bonhoeffer, we should not think of the metaphor of *body* with the image of an

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[55] Bonhoeffer, 121.

[56] Bonhoeffer, 124–125.

[57] Bonhoeffer, 229.

[58] Clifford J. Green, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition" of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume I Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 16.

organism in *mind*. The church as the body of Christ should be thought of functionally.[59] The church is where the presence of Christ exists as community. With the church, God undertakes his first therapeutic act for humanity, acting to heal the primal rupture in history and to do so beyond history.[60]

The topics of community and church are important not simply because we empirically observe a common experience of human sinfulness that relates our personal culpability with ethical solidarity. More importantly, as Bonhoeffer writes, "This experience does not in any way constitute sociality; rather, sociality exists before the experience and independently of it."[61] God's act to cure at the social level—God's act itself—is that place of primary concern. Here, we come to appreciate what is central to Bonhoeffer's conceptual development, that is, "the ethical personality of collective persons."[62] Can the collective person behave as an ethical agent being addressed by another? For Bonhoeffer, the story of Israel as a collective people becomes paradigmatic to the answer of this question.[63] It happened in Israel and it now happens again in the *Sanctorum Communio*.

In the incarnate life and work of Jesus, God begins the work of restoring humanity, in history, by receiving the actions of one individual on behalf of a larger community. Bonhoeffer does not speak of substitutionary atonement. Christ's work in history begins a work that continues in the life of the church-community. God receives the actions of the one individual as the vicarious representative action which establishes God's new humanity, joining persons together into a new collective person, that is, into the collective that is Christ existing as community. E. H. Robertson captures this when he writes,

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[59] Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer Works*, 225. Bonhoeffer writes: "Is the body of Christ as a whole thus primarily present in the universal church, so that all individual congregations would be members only of this body? The N.T. says nothing of this kind. The question is also theologically misguided since it understands *the concept of the body of Christ* simply in an organic and physical sense, whereas it in fact expresses the presence of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in his church-community. The concept of the body in this context is not a *concept referring to form* but to *function*, namely the work of Christ (concerning the 'body' of the collective person…)."

[60] Bonhoeffer, 155: "*Christ's action as vicarious representative* can thus be understood from the situation itself. It is simultaneously 'within concrete time' and the 'for all times.'"

[61] Bonhoeffer, 116–117.

[62] Bonhoeffer, 118.

[63] Bonhoeffer, 119, footnote 26.

"The saving act of Christ is then seen, not only as the reconciling of man to God, but also as the restoring of the torn fabric of humanity."[64]

The implied theodic vision of the communion of saints affords us the ability to add an additional row of a sacramental image onto our previous table.

Table 2. 7 Typology of Approaches to Theodicy

Title of Response	7 Types of Responses		
	Sacramental Image	Therapeutic Curative	Bible Text
Perfect Plan	Lord of Nature/History	God's in Control	Is 46:9–11
Freewill Defense	Good and Bad Apples	Cooperate with God	Josh 24:15
Soul Making	The Vine Pruner	God's not finished: Yet	1 John 3:2
Open Theism	His Eye is on the Sparrow	God's responsive Love	1 John 4:8
Finite Theism	God/world Interdepend	Involve not Intervene	Gen 1:26
Protest Theodicies	"My God, Why Have…"	Challenge God	Amos 7:3
Sanctorum Communio	Christ Existing as Community	Present Suffering $\neq$ Future Glory	Rom 8:18

When viewing this table, it is important to remember how Bonhoeffer organizes his theological thinking. For him, "The doctrine of the primal state is hope projected backward."[65] Living in hope is not to go "behind the existence forced upon us as sinners," but is to work within it. It is for this reason that he can distinguish between the realization of the church and the actualization of the church. For Bonhoeffer, the reality of the church cannot be theologically questioned. If the church comes from God, "It must be revealed."

> Revelation of God's will is necessary because the primal community, where God speaks and the word becomes deed and history through human beings, is broken. Therefore God must personally speak and act, and at the same time accomplish a new creation of human beings, since God's word is always deed. *Thus, the church is already completed in Christ, just as in Christ its beginning is established.*[66]

What is realized, first in the life and ministry of the person of Jesus of Nazareth (as *the vicarious representative actor*), and ultimately in the eschaton, is being actualized in history, in the collective person of the community of saints. God immerses the divine purpose into human

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[64] E. H. Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1967), 14.

[65] Robertson, *Bonhoeffer*, 60–61.

[66] Robertson, 142.

history, where the sufferings of the present time take place. This empirical history, with its empirically present church, is the arena of divine action. Yet the communal nature of the church shows that divinity also has in view another arena, for God is not confined to history. Bonhoeffer writes: "Because of the eschatological character of community, which it shares with history, the deepest significance of community is 'from God to God'."[67]

D. Sacramental Basis of Therapeutic Ministry: Who Holds the Office?

Therefore, the community of which Bonhoeffer speaks is the communion of saints already realized in the eschaton; that is, the Church already is, and it becomes actualized within history.[68] Again, I repeat, only an ultimate response is a true theodic response to suffering. Bonhoeffer defines social community as a community of will,[69] because the will of community shapes the objective spirit of the church, and it is necessary to identify the unique objective spirit that offers a unique category for sociologists to study. Nevertheless, they cannot investigate this sociological group with their usual theoretical tools. According to Bonhoeffer, if one desires to study the church as a subject of sociology, it becomes important to take seriously the eternal word of God, in Christ, that takes form in history: "The word is the sociological principle by which the entire church is built up."[70] This community is the one in which the will of God in Christ is operative from beginning to end.[71] Bonhoeffer writes: "Objective spirit is thus to be regarded as the connection between historical and communal meaning, between the temporal and spatial intentions of a community. Objective spirit is will exerting itself effectively on the members of the community."[72] For Bonhoeffer, the

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[67] Robertson, 101.

[68] John Milbank expresses a similar thought when he writes, "The church itself, as the realized heavenly city, is the telos of the salvific process." *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 403.

[69] Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer Works*, 86: "Community is a community of wills, built upon the separateness and difference of persons, constituted by reciprocal acts of will, finding its unity in what is willed, and counting among its basic laws the inner conflict of individual wills."

[70] Bonhoeffer, 246.

[71] Bonhoeffer, 247.

[72] Bonhoeffer, 99.

will of God for humanity becomes the will of the members of the communion of saints.[73]

This communal will is always a will to love. This communal will is one where all have heard and responded to the apostle's admonition to "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). And it was God's loving will, turned in the direction of his suffering creation, that caused God in Christ to join in their suffering. This was not simply for the purpose of participating in their reality, but, more importantly, to make the divine eschatological reality for them actualized within their historical context of suffering. God, in Christ, "unite[s] all individuals in himself, and act[s] before God as their vicarious representative." [74] This kind of vicarious representative action presents us with more than an ethical actor (although Bonhoeffer still believes that there is an ethical reason to accept this kind of vicarious representation). [75] This kind of vicarious representative action presents us with a theological concept (this is where sociology and theology are necessarily linked in the sociological study of the church).[76] It is at this point that we realize the *sanctorum communio* is also identified as the "*community-of-the-cross*, which contains within itself the contradiction of simultaneously representing utmost solitude and closest community."[77] This loving will of God acts upon, and is acted upon by, each member of the community. It finds expression in the "plurality of spirit, community of spirit, and unity of spirit."[78]

For Bonhoeffer, the historical form of the church community can be modeled by sociologists as having the empirical form of three concentric circles. The smallest of the three, the inner most circle, is the church as a confessing community. The objective center of this

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[73] Bonhoeffer, 141–142. Bonhoeffer asserts: "The church is God's new will and purpose for humanity. God's will is always directed toward the concrete, historical human being. But this means that it begins to be implemented *in history*. God's will must become visible and comprehensible at some point in history. But at the same point it must already be completed. Therefore, it must be revealed."

[74] Bonhoeffer, 148.

[75] Bonhoeffer, 156. Bonhoeffer writes: "It is true, the doctrine of vicarious representative action includes more than our ethical posture, but we *ought* to let our sin be taken from us, for we are not able to carry it by ourselves; we *ought not* reject this gift of God…and only for the sake of this love ought we abandon our ethical position of responsibility for ourselves."

[76] Bonhoeffer, 156–157.

[77] Bonhoeffer, 151.

[78] Bonhoeffer, 274.

community is the table of the Lord's Supper: this is where it identifies itself as the *community-of-the-cross*. This community is surrounded by and encompassed in a community of wills. The focal point of this community is the preaching of the cross: a preaching that must always be worldly in its call for willing followers. This is where it identifies itself as the *community-of-the-word*. This community of wills is surrounded by and encompassed into the widest circle; that is, the popular community, representing all of those who are baptized.[79] The *community-of-the-baptized* is the outermost expression of the empirical form of the historical actualization of the reality of Christ existing as community. In light of this historical form of the community, it becomes all the more clear how John Milbank can write that, "The life of the saints is inherently social, because it is the opposite of a life of sin, which is the life of self-love."[80] It is this social phenomena that models community in ways that go beyond the coercive political societies.[81] Yet and still, the social data that exert influence on the individual members, i.e., values, norms, structure…etc. are fully present in the community where Christ is present. The following figure models the three concentric circles where God's active love is at work in and for our suffering world.

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[79] Bonhoeffer, 247.

[80] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 402.

[81] Milbank, 402.

Figure 1. Three Sociologically Distinct Concentric Circles & Their Centers of Activity
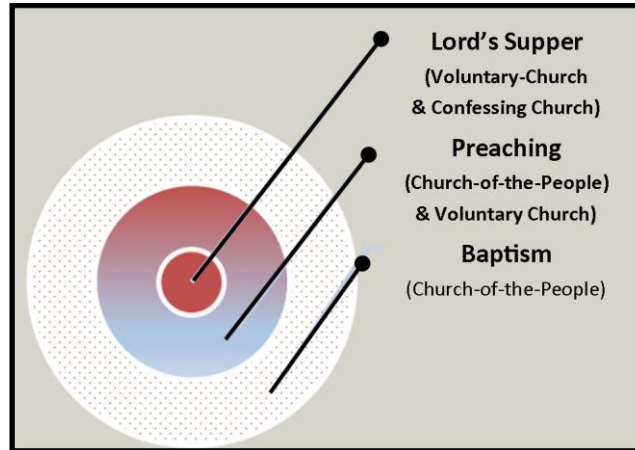
Bonhoeffer lays out these details in order to provide a definite description of the corporate body of Christ, and he does so in a way that preserves the integrity of the collective mission of God, while at the same time preserving the integrity of each individual missioner.

- Christ is present in this communal body.
- Christ is present with each member of this body.
- Christ is present, caring, and healing the rupture that took place at the moment of the fall.

This means that God's primary response to the problem of suffering is to be present where those who suffer. The church is a sacrament of the body of Christ.[82] The church is the visible sign of an invisible grace.[83]

What we have discussed thus far leads us to recognize that the unique theodic response of Bonhoeffer is not *that* he presents the *Sanctorum Communio* as a response to human suffering, but it is *the way that* this offer uniquely shapes the divine response to human

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[82] Milbank, 182.

[83] This is the way that the thoughts of Saint Augustine have commonly been summarized: "On the subject of the sacrament, indeed, which he receives, it is first to be well impressed upon his notice that the signs of divine things are, it is true, things visible, but that the invisible things themselves are also honored in them, and that that species, which is then sanctified by the blessing, is therefore not to be regarded merely in the way in which it is regarded in any common use." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, p. 312.

suffering. Thomas Oden frames clearly the unique challenge that Christian ministry must clarify when he frames the issue with the question whether Christian ministry is primarily sacramental or primarily therapeutic.[84] The Christian who offers pastoral care to the suffering one must be clear about what is more fundamental to his/her ministry efforts. The presence of Christ is the foundation for all therapeutic efforts. Preaching, [85] administering the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, engaging in pastoral care and counseling, political resistance, or whatever else becomes necessary to bandage the wounds of the hurting are all based upon, rooted in, and framed by the sacramental presence of Christ in the world through the church community.

Furthermore, Emmanuel Lartey, who offers four ideal types in the historical paradigm of pastoral care, captures this work of God in the "priesthood of believers" in one of his paradigms. He has named an approach that Bonhoeffer's work prefigures, namely, the communal-contextual approach. According to Lartey, "This approach reacts against the clericalization, clinicalization, and individualization of pastoral care and pastoral theology. Practitioners employing this model seek to restore these disciplines to their roots within communities of faith."[86] Bonhoeffer prefigures this model because for him the unique divine response comes only in a context where there is the priesthood of all believers (non-clericalization), where there is no space fabricated at a distance from emergent suffering (non-clinicalization) for the whole race of humanity (non-individualization). It is in this context that the new Adam is called to wait upon others during the time we wait in hope.

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[84] Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983); cf. T*ransforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty*, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

[85] See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991); cf. Maury Jackson and Horace Crogman, "Shepherding Public Discourse Practices: Homiletic Form Aligned to the Logic Operative in Racial Rhetoric and Public Theological Discourse for Secular Liberal Democracies" in *Cultural and Religious Studies* 4, no. 9 (September 2016).

[86] Emmanuel Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 123.

Conclusion: Note on the Paradox of *Sanctorum Communio* and Apocatastasis

The realm of Christ is the realm of God. This is the hope of the Christian realized in the eschaton. Bonhoeffer's reference, in the final paragraphs of his dissertation, to 1 Corinthians 15:24 places the story of the Church in the larger drama of the story of God. He does not quote the verses before and after, yet they stand behind the essential argument throughout his entire essay.

> For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christs the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. (1 Cor 15:22–26).

What happens is that God's first response to human suffering in the person of Jesus is then followed by the *sanctorum communio*, and then finally God finishes the work in the eschaton. As Bonhoeffer says: "What has become reality here is not the *ecclesia triumphans* [church triumphant], but the Realm of God extending throughout the whole world."

It is the "all" in the Corinthians passage and the realm of God extending throughout the "whole world" in Bonhoeffer's next to the last paragraph of his book that introduces a more troubling question, which he does not fully address, but clearly hints at an answer: the problem of *apocatastasis* (the salvation of all). Like the term "suffering," in the index of his work, so too the term "*apocatastasis*" only has three references.[87] The first time that this word is mentioned is in a footnote where Bonhoeffer is critical of Fredrich Schleiermacher's motives for why we should love everybody, namely, because they share the divine spirit. Here Bonhoeffer challenges this reasoning: "This line of argument is methodologically impossible, since apocatastasis [the salvation of all] can at most be the very last word in eschatological reflection, but not as the self-evident point of departure for any theological argument."[88] The second time that this word appears is in a note on a deleted section from his earlier publication that is referenced as *Sanctorum Communio A*. Again, this

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[87] Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer Works*, 360.

[88] Bonhoeffer, 171.

reference is in connection with challenging Schleiermacher's method of placing the doctrine of apocatastasis as a point of departure in his theological argument.

But what do we make of Bonhoeffer's third use of the term, in light of his words that "apocatastasis can at most be the very last word in eschatological reflection"? One may be tempted to think that for Bonhoeffer this last word in eschatological reflection is a speculative word, but it is much more than that. The last word is a word of hope. For Bonhoeffer, the hope of the church is a hope for the universal salvation of all. Bonhoeffer speaks of "the inner necessity of the idea of apocatastasis" as an unresolvable paradox.[89] Here we see why this unresolvable paradox must be the Christian eschatological hope:

> The strongest reason for accepting the idea of apocatastasis would seem to me that all Christians must be aware of having brought sin into the world, and thus of having the sins of humanity on their conscience. Justification and sanctification are inconceivable for anyone if that individual believer cannot be assured that God will embrace not only them but all those for whose sins they are responsible.[90]

Here, for Bonhoeffer, universal salvation cannot be a category of developmental psychology encroaching into theological method. God does not save everybody because we are all going to die short of our next stage of moral, psycho-social, or faith development (and it would be unjust to punish some, but not others).

For Bonhoeffer, universal salvation is a hope based upon the sacramental presence and healing activity of the new Adam: where a vicarious representative collective called the *sanctorum communio* leads individuals within it to intercede on behalf of another recognizing that no one stands alone, but the community "leads *a single life*."[91] This novel sociological structure is where you find that community of love perfected. It is that collective person known as the body of Christ or the new Adam, who like Moses and Paul[92] would

> ask God to accept or condemn him together with his people…. and he curses himself out of community with God and from his people to the place of damnation, where they are, precisely because he truly loves both community

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[89] Bonhoeffer, 286.

[90] Bonhoeffer, 287.

[91] Bonhoeffer, 185.

[92] Bonhoeffer, 184. Bonhoeffer references Exod 32:32 and Rom 9:1.

with God and his people, which means, because he is obedient to the command that we should unreservedly surrender ourselves to the neighbor.[93]

If Bonhoeffer is forced to join the theodicy debate as philosophers have put forth the question of why there is evil, he wants to know who is asking the question! This question asked, by the old Adam, implies that this human is complicit in sin and responsible for suffering and evil. If this question is asked by the new Adam, the presence of Christ existing as community, it's a hope for an eschatological fulfillment of the mission of God in the community of the cross. And it is this and only this hope that can justify God's existence, while evil exists. For Bonhoeffer, this vision of *the sanctorum communio* is the only one that can know "that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to it."[94]

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[93] Bonhoeffer, 184.185.

[94] Bonhoeffer, 289. Cf. Rom 8:18, the NRSV reads "revealed to us."