

4-15-2021

## Sanctification and Ecclesiology

Gregory Moffitt

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, moffittg@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/grapho>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

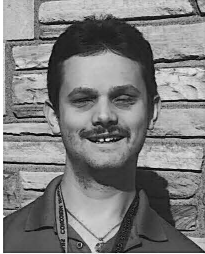
Moffitt, Gregory (2021) "Sanctification and Ecclesiology," *Grapho : Concordia Seminary Student Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/grapho/vol3/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Grapho : Concordia Seminary Student Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

# Sanctification and Ecclesiology in Bonhoeffer

Gregory Moffitt



Greg Moffitt is a doctoral candidate at Concordia Seminary and is from King George, Virginia. He completed his undergraduate education at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, where he earned a BA with a double major in political science and philosophy. He then earned a MA in religion and a STM at Concordia Theological Seminary. He also enjoys playing the piano and serving as a church organist.

## Introduction

The question of the nature of the Christian community is complex, with far-reaching implications. For instance, the way in which we conceive the Christian community impacts how we think about questions such as the sanctification of the individual as he or she lives out their vocation as a part of the community. In this paper I will examine how Dietrich Bonhoeffer discussed the Christian

community, focusing particularly upon how he discusses questions concerning ecclesiology and sanctification in his *Discipleship* and *Life Together*.

## Historical Background

It is first necessary to discuss Bonhoeffer's historical background since an understanding of the challenges which Bonhoeffer and the German Confessing Church were facing sheds a great deal of light upon his theology. Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau, Silesia, which was at that time a part of Germany.<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer began his study of theology at the University of Tübingen in 1923, although, initially, his courses at the university were more focused on philosophy than theology; this greatly impacted Bonhoeffer's theology and thought.<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, along with most of the other theology students at that institution, studied under Adolf Schlatter, who was an exegete of the New Testament, and Bonhoeffer used his commentaries extensively throughout his life.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most important events in history which would influence much of Bonhoeffer's theology was the rise of the Nazi regime. Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933. That year would prove to be the most chaotic year for Bonhoeffer

and also one of the most important influences upon his later thought and writing. He began the year with ecumenical work. The Universal Council for Life and Work and the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches were holding meetings consisting of their governing bodies. Their goal was to merge these groups and Bonhoeffer's collaboration was essential in achieving this outcome. Bonhoeffer then publicly addressed some of his concerns with the rise of Hitler on February 1 of that year when he was asked to discuss "the younger generation's altered view of the concept of *Führer*" on a radio show.<sup>4</sup> After Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer was one of the first theologians to recognize Hitler's policy against the Jews as a problem for the church; his greatest contribution to this discussion was his subsequent essay concerning the church and the Jewish question.



*Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Sigurdshof (1939). Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA 3.0*

Hitler's rise to power forced Bonhoeffer to discuss the role of the church concerning political matters; Bonhoeffer defined three ways in which the church ought to interact with the state: the church can call the state out for what it does and make it responsible for its actions, the church has the obligation to assist the victims of the state's actions, and the church may engage in direct political action.<sup>5</sup>

Another important influence upon Bonhoeffer's theology, particularly upon his ecclesiology, was the seminary run by the Confessing Church, the primary church that was resisting Hitler. Bonhoeffer's seminary was located in Finkenwalde and it trained pastors for the Confessing Church. Since this seminary was resisting the Nazi regime, it faced increasing resistance from the government.<sup>6</sup>

Another problem that faced the seminary was Bonhoeffer's students becoming legalized with the state, which they did through consistories of the provincial churches. They did it in order to avoid persecution and the consistories made this process easy for ordinands of the Confessing Church, as an ordinand only needed to declare that he wanted to be assigned a pastorate in a legal church.<sup>7</sup> Much of the persecution which the Confessing Church faced came from the German Evangelical Church with the Nazi regime behind them. This happened by the issuing

of several orders and decrees which attempted to severely limit the activities of this church, such as prohibiting them from holding worship services in unconsecrated buildings and preventing them from taking up a collection for imprisoned Confessing Church members.<sup>8</sup>

Bonhoeffer's next major accomplishment was the composition of *Discipleship* in 1936. The foundations of *Discipleship* go back to Bonhoeffer's time in London and New York. The first inspiration for this book had been his conversations with Jean Lasserre in New York. Much of the material for *Discipleship* also came from his lectures at Finkenwalde.<sup>9</sup>

### **Overview of Bonhoeffer's Anthropology**

With this historical introduction in mind, I shall now begin to discuss the primary questions concerning Bonhoeffer's teaching on ecclesiology and sanctification. However, in order to understand the relationship between sanctification and ecclesiology in Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* and *Discipleship*, we must first discuss his doctrine of sanctification in general, paying particular attention to other theological considerations which shape and influence his doctrine of sanctification. For Bonhoeffer, sanctification is conformity to Christ, that is, being united to Him in the church community. We shall now examine the background of his thinking concerning this matter.

The first area we must consider that influences Bonhoeffer's doctrine of Christian formation is his anthropology. There are two subcategories of Bonhoeffer's anthropology: his theological anthropology and his philosophical anthropology. Generally, theological anthropology is concerned with the meaning of humanity's fall in Adam, restoration in Christ, and life in anticipation of Christ's return. On the other hand, philosophical anthropology concerns itself more with questions that identify the manner in which body, spirit, mind, and soul interact. These differing approaches to anthropology share some commonalities, such as the fact that both theological and philosophical anthropology have to concern themselves with the widespread and devastating effects which the fall has had upon the entire human being, both body and soul.

Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology flows from his Christology, especially Christ's work in and through the resurrection. With the significance of Christ's life, death, and resurrection at the forefront for Bonhoeffer, he emphasizes God's full and complete renewal of human beings in Christ, who is the new Adam, and he applies the work of Christ as the reality for all of humanity.<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology affects his theological exposition of other doctrines, such as his view concerning conversion and justification. In particular, since all mankind

was completely renewed through Christ's resurrection and brought into His body, mankind is not renewed through individual conversion. In other words, the renewal of all mankind through the death and resurrection of Christ is all-encompassing, and, therefore, justification is not the renewal of the Christian's being since all mankind has been renewed in Christ. Instead, through the Holy Spirit, that which Christ has accomplished is imputed to Christians on account of their faith. So the whole world is renewed and reconciled to God, but Christians alone benefit from Christ's work.

Bonhoeffer's teaching on anthropology informs the nature of Christian formation in his theology. Christian formation cannot refer to growth in human nature since it has already been wholly renewed both in and by the work of Christ in His resurrection. The reason why Bonhoeffer emphasized this point is because if it is denied, then the totality of Christ's work is at least partially denied. This could lead to seeking a means of renewal outside of Christ. Bonhoeffer's philosophical anthropology operates under similar assumptions and works in the same general manner. This is most clearly articulated by Bonhoeffer in his *Act and Being*, where he explores the relationship of the human being to self and Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Bonhoeffer's philosophical anthropology rejects the categories and distinctions of body, soul, spirit, and mind, even as it simultaneously affirms their existence. For Bonhoeffer, human beings simply exist, and they only exist as a unified whole which is composed of body, soul, spirit, and mind, which is constituted in and through the Christ encounter. His views concerning these matters also affect his teaching on Christian formation. First of all, this means that formation in Christ will not speak of shaping the soul as if it could occur as a distinct activity. This means that there is no room to grow or become more complete, because, theologically speaking, one is already everything in the death and resurrection of Christ. Furthermore, on a philosophical level, for Bonhoeffer being is not something that increases or is formed in the first place. This affirmation should not be taken to mean that Bonhoeffer does not appreciate the reality that, through discipleship to Christ, the Christian is progressively changed; there is a tension in Bonhoeffer's thought between the fact that the Christian's entire being has already been renewed and the fact that the Old Adam still persists in Christians. This has implications concerning Bonhoeffer's doctrine of sanctification since, although Bonhoeffer clearly realizes that Christians are made complete and perfect in Christ, he nevertheless insists upon "costly" grace and discipleship in which the Christian becomes increasingly faithful to the call of Christ to true discipleship. The fundamental distinction which Bonhoeffer makes is that he explicates this "completeness in Christ" in reference to different theological categories than in typical accounts of "progressive sanctification." Living the Christian life is not seen by Bonhoeffer as any sort of progression in being or soul, but rather as a "progressive" or increasing fidelity to the renewed and sanctified state that has already been achieved through Christ's resurrection.

Therefore, Christians grow in a way of being, not in “being” itself. This is a significant point, as Bonhoeffer shifts the conceptual field of talk to the nature of formation in Christ and how the church participates in it. Bonhoeffer’s Christology, particularly his view that we are entirely completed already in Christ’s victorious resurrection, drastically shapes his view of anthropology and both of these redefine “progress” in Christian life.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Bonhoeffer’s Approach to Sanctification***

In light of Bonhoeffer’s anthropology, we can now discuss Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of sanctification. For Bonhoeffer, sanctification is more frequently discussed in relation to the church community than to the individual, although he sees both the individual and communal aspects of sanctification to be important. Holiness and sanctification are best viewed as having been perfected in Christ and not as something into which one incrementally and progressively grows. This means that sanctification is a binary reality; either one is dead in sin or one has been made into the new man. Being part of the true church means that one is sanctified. It is a reality that is established in Christ, into which Christians live more faithfully as they put off their old way of being. Therefore, the church is not to be encouraged to grow into a state of existence which it has not yet achieved, such as being more “holy” than it was previously. Instead, the Christian community should be reminded and admonished concerning what they already are and exhorted to increase in their *faithfulness* to their current identity in Christ. Again, Bonhoeffer wants to emphasize that Christians are already holy because of Christ’s work and that the only growth that can occur is for Christians to more fully realize this holiness in their lives.

For Bonhoeffer, both the sanctification of the church as well as the individual can be conceived of in terms of space, since within Christ’s body God has created a place in the world that is separated from sin and in which purity of life is realized and this “holy space” is the church, where the baptized live as new humanity, as Christ’s presence. In other words, the community’s purity of life increasingly reflects and expresses, but does not increasingly or progressively generate, God’s holiness.<sup>13</sup> For instance, if one is musically gifted, practicing the instrument one plays can make one more fully realize that gift and use it to its full potential, but this practicing does not give the gift in the first place.

Nevertheless, sanctification in Bonhoeffer’s theology is seen at times as a process, and he explicates and develops it by putting sanctification into categories of marks or fruits. This terminology permits Bonhoeffer to discuss “progress” in the Christian life but avoid advocating for a development or increase of God’s sanctification beyond what Christ has achieved. These marks are divided into several groups. The first mark of sanctification is that it “manifests itself in a clear

separation from the world.” Secondly, sanctification must “prove itself through conduct that is worthy of God’s realm of holiness.” This would include loving your neighbor and living in a Christ-like manner. A third mark of sanctification is that it “will be bidden in waiting for the day of Jesus Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

While these are general marks of sanctification, Bonhoeffer also discusses marks of the sanctification of the church. First, the church must recognize the visible space that it inhabits. This refers to both God’s established holy space and to the rest of the world where it remains sealed and preserved until Christ’s return. In other words, the first mark of the church’s sanctification is its existence in that there is a church that is faithfully living away from darkness toward the light, so that it can stand under God’s judgment. This means that the church’s members will strive to avoid all worldly things which are contrary to God’s will. The second mark of the church’s sanctification concerns the manner in which the church proves its sanctification through conduct worthy of the body of Christ. The church lives out of the daily fruits of the Gospel in which they exist, in which a break with their former way of life has occurred. Christians move away from their former, sinful, ways and develop moral character appropriate to their identity.



*Dietrich Bonhoeffer with confirmands, March 21, 1932 in Friedrichsbrunn. Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA 3.0*

We have now discussed at some length what Christian formation is not for Bonhoeffer. Now we shall discuss what it is. Bonhoeffer understands “Christian formation” as being grounded within the body of Christ, in that Christ’s body has a specific incarnate, cruciform, and resurrected shape. Therefore, true Christian formation is Christ conforming the church into sameness with Himself. Crucial to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christian formation is the “social” or “communal” notion of Christian formation. Similar to his anthropology, it frames and informs all subsequent discussions concerning Bonhoeffer’s thought on this topic. For Bonhoeffer the social form of Christ is an ongoing topic of discussion throughout his works. However, this subject receives its greatest and most thorough treatment in his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*. This work develops both the theological and social nature of community and shows that the true church is Christ existing as community. Bonhoeffer argues that communities have a collective will. McGarry points out that an epiphenomenon<sup>15</sup> occurs through this, which Bonhoeffer calls a community’s objective spirit. Bonhoeffer argued that a

community's objective spirit could be treated as a collective person and as a result be given a personal character.<sup>16</sup>

Bonhoeffer puts his sociological work into dialogue with his theological anthropology through the biblical categories of both fallen humanity in Adam and restored humanity in Christ. For Bonhoeffer, humanity in Adam is the collective person representing the will turned in upon itself as community. In other words, a community of individuals that are willing an existence with "self" at its center can be sociologically treated as a collective individual and humanity in Adam is the "will-to-self," a collective person that exists as community. Only the collective person of Christ existing as church and community can supersede the collective person of Adam. Consequently, Bonhoeffer conceptualizes Christ's work as being the second Adam, renewing through his obedience that which Adam destroyed as a consequence of his disobedience. God's community, which is the collective body of Christ, is the collective person emerging by means of a new community, one consisting of renewed individuals in Christ who do the will of God. In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer demonstrates that the church is Christ existing as community because the church community is truly Christ's body. Although Bonhoeffer never treats the sociological presence of the church in the same manner after the completion of *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer nevertheless continues to be concerned with Christ's presence in the world through his church. He also never departs from the social understanding of Christ's presence in the world.

### ***Sanctification and Ecclesiology in Life Together and Discipleship***

In *Life Together* Bonhoeffer begins to describe the nature of the church and to articulate his ecclesiology by stating what the Christian community is not and cannot be in view of its belonging to Christ. He states that "the Christian cannot simply take for granted the privilege of living among other Christians. Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. So Christians, too, belong not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the midst of enemies. There they find their mission, their work."<sup>17</sup> For Bonhoeffer, the Christian church cannot cut itself off from the world around it. Although he saw this as a general principle, it is particularly applicable to his own time and context, particularly since he wrote this work in 1938, which was a period of great distress and temptation for the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer warns and cautions against either compromising one's Christian identity to the world or isolating oneself from the world so as to not proclaim the Gospel of Christ. For Bonhoeffer, the oneness of the Christian community exists even though it is scattered amongst unbelievers since its oneness rests in the death and resurrection of Christ. In order for a Christian community to be genuine, it must be centered in Jesus Christ. No Christian community can abandon this foundation and remain a



Christian community.<sup>18</sup>

Bonhoeffer then proceeds to explain the implications of this definition of a Christian community. First, this means that a Christian is dependent upon others in the community. Secondly, it means that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. Additionally, Bonhoeffer asserts that we have been chosen in Jesus Christ from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.<sup>19</sup>

Bonhoeffer then discusses the implications of this view of Christian community for justification and sanctification. Concerning justification, Christians no longer seek their salvation, deliverance, and justification in themselves, but in Jesus Christ alone. Bonhoeffer states that Christians no longer live by their own resources, that is, by accusing themselves and justifying themselves, but rather they trust in God's accusation and God's justification, which is God's Word pronounced upon them. Therefore, the Christian's righteousness *coram Deo* is an alien righteousness.<sup>20</sup>

Bonhoeffer then discusses the relationship between community and sanctification; he emphasizes that these are both gifts from God and not cultivated by man's efforts or work. As a result, only God knows the real condition of both our sanctification and the Christian community; human judgment is often in error. Bonhoeffer contends that what appears weak and insignificant to us may be great and glorious to God. He states, "Just as Christians should not be constantly feeling the pulse of their spiritual life, so too the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be continually taking its temperature." Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.<sup>21</sup>

From all of these passages in *Life Together*, we observe how vital a Christ-centered community is for Bonhoeffer and that Christians must exist in community for each other for the sake of Christ rather than for the sake of having a community. Sanctification and the church community are inseparable since it is only in the community of the church where true Christian sanctification occurs. Bonhoeffer's conception of the Christian community raises important questions for the 21st century church. In particular, in light of the pandemic, how can the church function as community when its members cannot or choose not to meet together? This necessitates a reimagined idea of community; while obviously in an ideal world the Christian community would meet in person, the church needs to address circumstances that prevent this from happening. Bonhoeffer's idea of the Christian community can be realized in a number of ways, including online gatherings. This is a reality which the church will likely need to contend with even after the pandemic given the prevalence of online resources that are available and the fact that some members may choose to continue to attend online. This obviously

presents a number of problems, the most serious problem being the devaluation of the Lord's Supper. Ultimately, the church needs to recognize that it is possible for Christian community to be realized in a number of ways, including through virtual gatherings. However, it also needs to be stressed that it is impossible to experience Christian community to its fullest extent without in-person gatherings, since the Lord's Supper is a vital part of the Christian community.

Now we shall examine Bonhoeffer's conception of sanctification, ecclesiology, and their interaction with each other in his *Discipleship*. In this work, Bonhoeffer frames sanctification in terms of discipleship, that is, in obeying Christ's call to follow Him. However, we should first consider Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross since self-denial and bearing the cross are essential elements of Bonhoeffer's conception of true discipleship.

Bonhoeffer argues that both self-denial, which is not knowing or caring about oneself for the sake of Christ, and bearing the cross are essential elements of discipleship. Concerning Christ's command in Matthew 16:24 that his followers "take up their cross," Bonhoeffer states, "The grace of Jesus is evident in his preparing his disciples for this word by speaking first of self-denial. Only when we have really forgotten ourselves completely, when we really no longer know ourselves, only then are we ready to take up the cross for his sake. When we know only him, then we also no longer know the pain of our own cross."<sup>22</sup>

Bonhoeffer then discusses the meaning of bearing the cross. Unlike some theologians, Bonhoeffer limits the idea of bearing the cross to suffering which comes from our allegiance to Jesus Christ alone; he excludes such things as misfortune, disease, or any other ordinary suffering.<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer warns against seeking one's own cross, but rather asserts that God appoints a cross for every disciple. Bonhoeffer then discusses the manner in which bearing the cross applies to the community as well as the individual; since members of the church community are called to bear each other's burdens, it follows that they also bear each other's crosses.<sup>24</sup>

Now we shall examine both the individual and the communal aspects of discipleship in Bonhoeffer's thinking. Understanding both facets of his view of discipleship is vital to a proper understanding of his writing. Concerning Bonhoeffer's view of the relationship between discipleship and the individual, he stresses the necessity of each person to individually follow Christ, and no one can rely upon others to do the works of discipleship on their behalf. He states that Christ's call to discipleship calls each person as a unique and distinct individual.<sup>25</sup> He then argues that any such discipleship entails a radical break from the world and at times from those with whom the disciple was previously acquainted. This must be done in order that following Christ remains of utmost importance.<sup>26</sup>

In closing, sanctification and ecclesiology are dominant themes in

Bonhoeffer's theology. In both *Life Together* and *Discipleship*, sanctification is seen in ecclesiological terms in that sanctification only takes place in the church community faithfully following Christ and being conformed to Him. The sanctification of the individual can only take place in the context of the church, of which the individual is a part and through which he becomes a disciple and follower of Christ. Bonhoeffer's statement that Christian sanctification can only take place in the church community has very important implications. The North American tendency to view Christianity in individualistic ways runs counter to the biblical conception of Christian community as expressed by Bonhoeffer. This is an implication of Bonhoeffer's thought because he asserts that members of the Christian community are dependent upon each other. This means that the Christian cannot function in isolation.

Additionally, the way in which Bonhoeffer discusses sanctification can provide a helpful antidote to concerns which are frequently expressed by Lutherans concerning progressive models of sanctification. Some Lutherans are afraid that talk of the Christian increasing in holiness makes our salvation a synergistic process; Bonhoeffer's idea of sanctification assuages this concern, since in his thought the sanctification of the Christian community is already a completed reality in the death and resurrection of Christ. Now all that is left to do is for Christians to more fully realize this reality in their lives. This allows us to talk about Christian growth without minimizing the completeness of the believer's restoration in Christ. For Bonhoeffer sanctification is not about increasing in degrees of holiness but rather living out one's new identity more fully.

---

## Endnotes

- 1 Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 1.
- 2 Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 18.
- 3 Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 19.
- 4 Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 125.
- 5 Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 126.
- 6 Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 202.
- 7 Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 203.
- 8 Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 205.
- 9 Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 206.

- 10 Joseph McGarry, "Conformed to Christ: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Christian Formation," *Journal of Spiritual Care*, Vol. 5, no. 2, (2012): 226-242, 227.
- 11 McGarry, "Conformed to Christ," 228.
- 12 McGarry, "Conformed to Christ," 230.
- 13 McGarry, "Conformed to Christ," 229.
- 14 McGarry, "Conformed to Christ," 234.
- 15 An epiphenomenon is a secondary phenomenon which is caused by, and coincides with, the primary phenomenon.
- 16 McGarry, "Conformed to Christ," 232.
- 17 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, G. L. Müller, A. Schönherr, & G. B. Kelly, Eds., D. W. Bloesch & J. H. Burtness, Trans. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 5, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 27
- 18 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31.
- 19 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31.
- 20 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31–32.
- 21 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 38
- 22 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*. M. Kuske, I. Tödt, G. B. Kelly, & J. D. Godsey, Eds., B. Green & R. Krauss, Trans. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 4. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 86.
- 23 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 86-87.
- 24 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 88.
- 25 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 92.
- 26 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 93–94.