



Bonhoeffer on Baptism: Discipline for the Sake of the Gospel

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The baptism of infants continues to be the means by which the overwhelming majority of persons is added to membership in the Lutheran Church.¹ It is a simple yet important observation, therefore, that this sacrament provides a primary and often ready-made evangelism opportunity for the church. Parents, for example, normally expect the church to address the situation of their unbaptized infant. Out of an awareness of this opportunity, but more fundamentally out of faithfulness to her Lord, this same church is called to care theologically and pastorally about baptism.

The contention of this article is that indiscriminate baptism of infants is often not only poor evangelism but also weakened proclamation. This common practice frequently ignores the context of the sacrament's reception and overlooks the radical claims of the Gospel itself. For this reason, a special care is herein advocated—referred to as a baptismal discipline—which deals with these concerns and the sensitive questions of when and for whom the sacrament is administered. For the sake of the Gospel, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was advocating such a discipline among Lutherans more than a generation ago, and this is an attempt to learn from him.²

THE BAPTISMAL DILEMMA

Historically, Martin Luther's own defense of the baptism of infants was evoked by the Gospel itself. If infants were not permitted baptism because they lacked faith, the sacrament was threatened with becoming a humanly-constituted act

¹In 1978, for example, 44,095 children under 16 years were received into The American Lutheran Church by baptism. Omitting the transfer category, the only other means of accession approaching infant and child baptism was affirmation of faith. This paper shall make a point, furthermore, that infant baptism and affirmation are not unrelated. Cf. *1980 Yearbook of The American Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), p. 316.

²For the complete study, cf. Glenn L. Borreson, "Toward a Baptismal Discipline: A Study in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" (unpublished M. Th. thesis, Luther Theological Seminary, 1978).

and thereby something other than the Gospel of the unconditional forgiveness of sins. Rather than narrowing the scope of the Gospel by excluding infants whose future in respect to faith included elements of risk, Luther boldly reminded his opponents that if the baptism of infants was wrong, "all this time down to the present day no man on earth could have been a Christian."³ Quite obviously, God worked effectively through the baptism of infants and would continue to do so.

On the other hand, Luther hardly encouraged a casual administration of the sacrament. He

worried that many children often turned out so badly after baptism because they were prayed for so uncaringly at the time of their baptism. He did not doubt the validity of the baptism of these infants; yet he abhorred implications of magical content in the act. Baptism always belonged within a context of faith. It remained a sacrament of the church striving to bring the child to belief. It assumed a people living in its continued reality of death and resurrection.

The general appropriateness of the baptism of infants is affirmed in this paper. In an indiscriminate administration of the sacrament, however, the clarity of the Gospel for which Luther himself cared so intensely is obscured. Grace is deprived of its rightful context of faith. Inheritors as we are of a state church tradition, the baptism of every infant without question frequently has come to be assumed an automatic right, hardly a privilege, much less a humble yet joyful celebration of divine action. For every parent who has requested the sacrament out of a life lived within the community of faith, another seemingly has requested it only out of duty thinly masked as piety or out of a fear of death or the relatives.

To proceed with this sacrament without a sensitivity to the context of reception is to irresponsibly ignore fundamental dimensions of this radical event. Theologically, for example, the inter-relationship of grace and faith is called into question. What kind of parental faith will not live from God's grace where he chooses to give it in Word and Sacrament? Biblically, baptism has the command of Christ. Yet insisting on the authority of the commission of Matthew 28 without simultaneously acknowledging the death-resurrection reality of Romans 6 is to misappropriate the biblical witness. Ecclesialogically, baptism as an act of the church is not the satisfaction of an individualistic impulse but an incorporation into community.

Our rights-oriented society, however, has often come to view baptism as a demand to be met. If pastors respond with a disciplined rather than an indiscriminate approach, very personal needs, feelings and identities of all parties will be involved. The congregation itself faces a possible tension caused by losing an easy point of numerical growth. That tension ought to be small, however, compared to the embarrassment appropriately caused by a present educational contradiction within Lutheranism. Our church which has been so careful to educate persons for their participation in the Sacrament of Holy Communion has been most casual and neglectful about preparing parents and sponsors for their role in the baptism of infants.

In 1942 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while defending the baptism of infants against the attacks of the Silesian pastor Arnold Hitzer, called for an "authentic evangeli-

³"The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther," *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 443.

cal baptismal discipline."⁴ Although Bonhoeffer implicitly recognized the dangers of a cultural Christianity, specifically in Germany, he was not about to abandon the baptism of infants for a "believer's baptism." On the other hand, this traditional Lutheran practice would not go unchallenged. For this reason, Bonhoeffer may be able to illumine our present pastoral dilemma with a position that is at one and the same time Lutheran, with a sensitivity to a heritage of baptism anchored in God's grace, and innovative, with an awareness that the baptism of infants may not be appropriate in every situation.

Bonhoeffer's advocacy of baptismal discipline is neither a pious aberration of his Finkenwalde years nor a theological puzzle from his years of imprisonment.⁵ Quite the contrary,

a continuity emerges throughout the Bonhoeffer writings in a consistent movement toward the advancement of a discipline. The passionate indictment of baptismal “cheap grace” in *The Cost of Discipleship*, for example, builds on earlier theological foundations, especially in respect to Christian community, and is affirmed and shaped in practical ways in the last years of his life. In fact, Eberhard Bethge’s three-part ordering of Bonhoeffer’s career—foundation, concentration, liberation—correctly lifts up an underlying continuity which is found in the latter’s growing advocacy of a baptismal discipline for the sake of the Gospel.⁶ For that reason, the next three sections reflect Bethge’s structure in relation to the theme at hand.

CARRYING THE CHILD: THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

Born in Breslau, Germany, on February 4, 1906, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s childhood relationship to the church was typical of many of his time. The family read Bible stories, said grace at meals, and held occasional family religious celebrations under the influence of his mother’s piety. Nevertheless, this family of the educated aristocracy was not church-going and Dietrich himself was likely baptized at home according to the custom of the day.

Bonhoeffer’s decision to study theology, therefore, was greeted with curiosity or dismay more than with enthusiasm by his family, especially by his academically-oriented psychiatrist father. The son was not to be deterred, however, and by the age of 21, he had earned the equivalent of a doctorate with his foundational work, *The Communion of Saints*, which he completed under Reinhold Seeberg at

⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “On the Question of Baptism,” *True Patriotism: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1939-45*, from the *Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Volume III, ed. and intro. by Edwin H. Robertson, trans. by Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 163. (Hereinafter referred to as TP.)

⁵The “Finkenwalde years” are the middle to late 1930s when Bonhoeffer taught seminarians for the Confessing Church in Germany. The “years of imprisonment” are 1943 until his 1945 execution for his role in the resistance. Although the former years indicate an intense piety and the latter years much incomplete and suggestive work, this writer holds in respect to each that “aberration” is a label too negative and “puzzle” a label too unmindful of continuity to be of much value. Nevertheless, among Bonhoeffer scholars the debate goes on.

⁶The three parts correspond roughly to the years 1927-33, 1933-40, and 1940-45; cf. Eberhard Bethge, “The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life and Theology,” *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register*, LI, No.2 (February, 1961), p. 3. The discontinuity which others find in Bonhoeffer’s theology this writer does not find reflected in his subject; cf. John B. Phillips, *Christ For Us In The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

The University of Berlin. This study and two early sermons provide a first look at Bonhoeffer’s reflection on baptism.

Two 1932 baptismal sermons by Bonhoeffer are a clear indication that he understood the Word of God as the creative power in the sacrament. Preaching on I John 4:16, he declares that God gives to the child “the real, indestructible foundation upon which his life is being built.” The Word itself works to place “the beginning and end of this child...in the hands of God.” Baptism is no mere human possibility; it connects one with the destiny of Christ and his dying and rising. It is a non-retractable promise. No less an affirmation of this new reality appears in the October baptismal sermon of the same year. “It means,” Bonhoeffer writes, “you live through me, before me alone, and you will live, you belong no more to the dead but eternity.” Baptism is God’s

being for the child; it is a promise of an eternal love. The fact that baptism is God's action already means that any discipline is prevented from attempting to undo what he has done. Not even in the interest of purifying the church is such prerogative granted.⁷

In his 1932 description of baptism giving the certainty of God's love, Bonhoeffer hints of a later prison years' theme in noting that it is simultaneously a call to be a person "entirely in the world, rooted strong in the earth but now seeing this world in a light which shows to him its needs and its hope."⁸ The sacrament initiates one in a process whereby one is not taken out of reality but awakened to it. The authoritative Word of God in baptism speaks not once and withdraws in silence; rather, it is the creative power for the future, even to involving the baptized person in the sufferings and helplessness of the world.

A unique contribution of Bonhoeffer is that he understood the communal dimensions of this Word of grace which constitutes the church. The philosophical basis for his argument is located in his relational and corporate concept of "person" in his 1928 book, *The Communion of Saints*. A human being does not exist in isolation but in encounter with others. Human life cannot be understood as consisting of isolated actions taking place only between an individual and God, but rather between a person-in-community and a God-bound-to-community. When God chooses to use the historical forms of the sacraments and words, God is embracing with divine creativity the social character of life itself to create a new humanity. God's very presence is the new reality of "Christ existing as community" in which faith comes into being and is nourished in the sociality of the church.⁹

It is precisely this relational concept of person which helps us understand that the church is called into responsibility in the moment of baptism. Since the infant possesses no faith, this new child of God must be "carried" by the community. Bonhoeffer's usage of this rich imagery of the mother "carrying the child" for the sake of conveying the church's relationship to the newly baptized is striking-

⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Taufrede für einen Neffen, 12. Mai 1932" and "Ansprache zur Taufe eines Neffen, Oktober 1932," in *Auslegungen - Predigten 1931 bis 1944*, Vol. IV of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge (6 vols.; Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958-74), pp. 147-153. (Hereinafter referred to as GS.)

⁸Ibid., p. 153.

⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, trans. by R. Gregor Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 22ff. (Hereinafter referred to as CS.) For an extended treatment of this subject, cf. Clifford J. Green, *The Sociality of Christ and Humanity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Early Theology, 1927-1933* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1972), pp. 61-73.

ing.¹⁰ It bespeaks both the gift and the responsibility. In regard to the former, God alone gives new life within an already existing community; in regard to the latter, the existing community is called to draw its life from that which provided its own beginnings and which will grant it its future, namely, the Word of God in its historical forms.

The church is "inwardly broken" where this latter is not happening, and the limits to infant baptism occur when "it is certain that the child being baptized is coming into contact with the church for the first and last time."¹¹ The church into which one is received in baptism is not only the eternal and universal church, it must be emphasized, but it is also the temporal and concrete community called the congregation, persons called together by the Word in a specific time and place. The phrase "Christ existing as community" is so strongly incarnational that

Bonhoeffer wrote, “The idea of a Christian who does not attach himself to the congregation is unthinkable.”¹² The implication is clear: to reject the local congregation and its life is an act of unbelief; it is a refusal to take seriously the incarnation of Christ. Any baptismal discipline would include the expectation of a community living under the word and parental participation in that earthly concrete and visible church.

As Bonhoeffer writes in *Act and Being*, the question of other revelations of God is moot here. For Christian community, Christ is concretely present in historical forms. “His being bound to the Church is the freedom of God. To leave open any freedom of God beyond the event of salvation is to formalize, to rationalize, the contingent positivity of that event.”¹³ To go searching for or insisting upon God’s revelation elsewhere is unbelief. God has bound himself freely to the church as an earthly, historical, concrete communion. At stake is faith itself which cannot be asserted as a general principle apart from Christ. Actually, to bring a child to baptism in isolation from community is to make of baptism a “religious” act which might well be regarded by Bonhoeffer as one’s attempt at self-salvation.¹⁴ Surely faith is not comprehended by occasional religious acts but requires the sustaining, continuing power of the community in which one is constantly recalled to Christ.

MAKING THE BREACH: THE EXERCISE OF DISCIPLINE

By 1935 Bonhoeffer had moved well out of the academic setting and teaching at The University of Berlin to the preachers’ seminary at Finkenwalde and training pastors under the Old Prussian Council of Brethren. The move was occasioned by the threat of Nazism to the Christian faith, by the response of the Confessing Church, and by the readiness of Bonhoeffer himself to enter the fray for the sake of the truth of the Gospel. Indeed, his intense essay “Costly Grace” in *The Cost of*

¹⁰CS, p. 167.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 156. It is noteworthy that the word for “church” in this phrase, *Christus als Gemeinde existierend*, can be translated not only “community” but also “congregation.” To translate the phrase as “Christ existing as congregation” would be true to the concrete nature of God’s revelation.

¹³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, trans. by Bernard Noble (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 136.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 162.

Discipleship is one of many indications that his theology was not only academic profession but also a very personal vocation:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.¹⁵ (*italics mine*)

Sometime in 1932 Bonhoeffer experienced a breach in his life which twelve years later he wrote was a turning away “from phraseology to reality.”¹⁶ Repulsed as he was by personal testimonies, he wrote and said little about the change except to comment in a personal letter that the movement was from an ambitious, self-willed life to being a servant of Jesus Christ. Most

interestingly, the word “breach,” which he uses to describe his experience, is the same word he employs to describe the event of baptism in *The Cost of Discipleship*: “Baptism...betokens a *breach*. Christ invades the realm of Satan, lays his hands on his own, and creates for himself his Church.” In the power of Christ, the baptized person is like a tree with its roots cut off and is called to die many deaths to the self, of which Bonhoeffer’s 1932 change was but perhaps a more momentous one. In any case, his earlier theology of sociality informs the public nature of the event of baptism not only for himself as he writes: “The breach with the world which has been effected in Christ can no longer remain hidden; it must come out into the open through membership in the church and participation in its life and worship.”¹⁷

Where life in the Body of Christ is not a reality for the persons who speak for the child, Bonhoeffer would and did call for restrictions. The sacrament is unrepeatable and should be administered where there is firm faith recalling the once-for-all deed of Christ. Baptism is the occasion of death and, therefore, to baptize infants without a church is not only an abuse of the sacrament, it betokens a disgusting frivolity in dealing with the souls of the children themselves.¹⁸ To treat Christ’s death lightly is an “abuse of the sacrament;” to treat the infant’s baptismal death casually is “disgusting frivolity.” Without questioning the validity of such a baptism, Bonhoeffer would remind the church that the sacrament is an initiation and requires the future for completion, that is, the coming to faith of the child. A real love for the child will include then not only the gift of baptism but also the context for remembering the gift.

With the Aryan clauses introduced in April 1933, a significant test for the German church became its response to growing anti-Semitism in light of sharing the bond of baptism with persons of Jewish blood. Franz Hildebrandt, for example, a close friend of Bonhoeffer’s and a pastor of Jewish ancestry, eventually left for England under mounting racist pressures. Bonhoeffer insisted a true concept

¹⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. by R. H. Fuller, with some revision by Irmgard Booth (2nd edition, revised and unabridged; New York: MacMillan Company, 1959), p. 36. (Hereinafter referred to as *CD*.)

¹⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, new enlarged edition, ed. by Eberhard Bethge (New York: MacMillan, 1971), p. 275. (Hereinafter referred to as *LPP*.)

¹⁷*CD*, pp. 206, 209.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 210.

of the church itself was at stake and was among the first to respond to the threat.¹⁹ He attacked the clauses and a subsequent new church constitution which excluded baptized Jews from positions of ecclesiastical leadership. He argued that a church position demands a decision on spiritual or ecclesiastical grounds, not on state authority with a racial concept contrary to the Scriptures. If baptism is indeed the call of God, he wrote in a subsequent appeal, the baptized Jew cannot be excluded from the church on racial grounds without degrading the sacrament to “a purely formal rite to which the Christian communion that administers it is indifferent.”²⁰ Bonhoeffer himself called for an identification with the baptized Jew, even to the extent that one would renounce personal privilege to stand in a bond made by God.

The formation of the Confessing Church—in which Bonhoeffer himself took part during this building crisis—can be understood in part as an attempt of the church to live in the reality of the lordship of Jesus Christ initiated in baptism. Perhaps no one pressed the Confessing Church’s

claim to be the true church to the degree which Bonhoeffer did, and in so doing he incurred the wrath of friend and foe alike. What is noteworthy for our purposes is that he understood even the attempt to decide on the boundaries of the church as an act of love. It may not be kind to try to include everyone in the church in some way or other, but in reality such effort may be an act of “unutterable hybris” which can deny the person God’s Word, and with it salvation. After all, it is not people but the Spirit through Word and Sacrament who calls the church into being. The determining of boundaries—as a baptismal discipline also implies—is “in the last resort a merciful act both to its members and to those outside. It is the last, the ‘strange,’ possibility of making the call to salvation audible.”²¹ Admittedly such action is taken with fear and trembling, and Bonhoeffer was quick to insist that the Confessing Church did not live by its purity but by its impurity as a church of sinners acknowledging their guilt and failure.

One of the grave dangers which Bonhoeffer was convinced the church faced was “the disobedience of ‘the believers’” who “simply confess their faith and leave it at that” with no regard for the community gathered under God’s Word. In their circumstances, Bonhoeffer warned, humble faith can often be disguised hardened unbelief. As a “preliminary step” of obedience, although not a saving step, Bonhoeffer advised such a person, in a hypothetical conversation: “You can leave your home on Sunday morning and come to hear the sermon. If you will not, you are of your own free will excluding yourself from the place where faith is a possibility.”²²

¹⁹Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question” in *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936*, from the *Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Vol. I, ed. and intro. by Edwin H. Robertson, trans. by Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 221-229.

²⁰Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Jewish-Christian Question as Status Confessionis” in *Tagebücher, Briefe, Dokumente 1923 bis 1945*, Vol. VI of *GS*, p. 273.

²¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Question of the Boundaries of the Church and Church Union” in *The Way to Freedom: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1935-1939*, from the *Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Vol. II, ed. and intro. by Edwin H. Robertson, trans. by Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 86.

²²*CD*, pp. 57-58. In the later Bonhoeffer this concern with the “first step” is reflected in his care for the penultimate; cf. my thesis, pp. 103-104.

In his work at Finkenwalde and in the collective parishes, Bonhoeffer the pastor began to see the need for the instructional time and guidance which had been part of the early church’s catechumenate. His own parish practice and instruction to his seminary charges emphasized that even in the New Testament infant baptism was never baptism of unbelievers but only of those who were to come to faith. For that reason, he insists in his seminar “Seelsorge” that before the baptism of an infant “it is unconditional to carry on a conversation with the parents. Both parental partners must be present for the baptism. Otherwise the baptism will not be granted them.”²³ Bonhoeffer is prepared to deny the sacrament if a parent is absent because a destructive crack in the immediate church community is indicated. In all likelihood, both the nature of belief and the meaning of the church is at stake. Bonhoeffer’s commitment to the corporate nature of the church also finds expression in his insistence that the baptism take place within a worship service, a decided change from the German custom of home christenings.

Why does Bonhoeffer pursue this course? It is not as a deluded or self-righteous effort to

rid the church of hypocrites or to purify it, but it is an attempt to shape a community of people who really live under the forgiving mercy of God. When the Church fails to employ such discipline, Bonhoeffer maintains that it loses its credence when it speaks the word of forgiveness. For the persons affected by such action, any church discipline's purpose is always "readmission to the community of salvation," an effort to spare one from the punishment of the last judgment.²⁴ If Christ is indeed present in the congregation which proclaims God's mercy and strives to live by it, it is not the community which is being self-righteous but those who pronounce themselves holy "by pursuing sanctification outside the Church."²⁵ Baptism has not only a theology of the Word, and with it grace, but also a theology of the cross, and with it discipleship.

GRANTING THE POSSIBILITY: THE SHAPE OF GRACE

By the time Bonhoeffer was executed at Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945, for his role in the resistance to Hitler, he had spent no less than six years in a double involvement in theology and political subterfuge. Just months before his arrest and imprisonment by the Gestapo on April 5, 1943, he authored his only article exclusively on baptism. This paper, "On the Question of Baptism," was a reply to an all-out attack on infant baptism by a Silesian pastor, Arnold Hitzer.²⁶ For our purposes, not only is it significant that Bonhoeffer defends infant baptism but also how he does so.

While granting that infant baptism has been misused, Bonhoeffer argues from the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions neither for its absolute necessity nor abolition but rather for its permission. To say the latter is not to regard it lightly but to recall that, after all, it is nothing less than a God-given means of grace, not a humanly-devised principle for doctrinaire implementation. His exegesis of the New Testament baptismal texts (e.g., Act. 16:15-33) leads him to the

²³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Seminare, Vorlesungen, Predigten 1924 bis 1941*. Vol. V of *GS*, p. 414.

²⁴*CD*, p. 263.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 253.

²⁶*TP*, pp. 143-164.

conclusion that infant baptism was probable even if not directly demonstrable. Further support of the practice is to be found in the eschatological character of the acceptance of children by Jesus himself.

On the other hand, the indissoluble connection in the New Testament between baptism and faith was wrongly expressed by Hitzer's argument for a "personal faith" as a pre-condition for baptism. That was giving faith an "alien colouring" since, theologically understood, faith has an objectivity as a "revelation, event, grace, gift of God (or Christ) through which the 'I' is completely done away with."²⁷ Faith is an event in which God is active in such a way that in our belief, the focus is upon him and the content of faith, not upon the believer. Faith is itself only in the state of receiving and that is why it is essential to baptism, without creating it. Certainly the circumstances of the New Testament mission situation resulting in the temporal priority of the confession of faith over baptism create neither a psychological nor a historical norm for the Christian church. What is normative is theological understanding of faith which may take on a

variety of expressions. Thus Bonhoeffer both concludes and advances his argument:

In any case, the New Testament provides no grounds for the refusal of infant baptism, precisely because of the concept of faith which is to be found in the doctrine of justification. In addition to this insight, which has been won from the concept of faith, we also have Jesus' command and promise of baptism as a sacramental reality and the knowledge that each man is born in sin and needs to be reborn. So the theoretical possibility of infant baptism becomes a concrete hope in faith, a confidence, as a result of which the community feels that it can no longer withhold baptism from its children.²⁸

Bonhoeffer understands the Confessions to present a similar case for infant baptism. From the promises of Christ himself comes the compelling urge to baptize the infant and intercede for the new member of the community. Faith compels baptism; the most theology can do is to open up the possibility of infant baptism. This compelling faith is not concerned with legalistic adherence to a law but rather with sharing the joy of God's salvation. Neither is this faith, whether of the supporting congregation or of the godparents, a human work; "it is intercession, hope, and acceptance of the promises of Christ for the child, brought about by the word of Christ."²⁹ Yet without the faith of the godparents, Bonhoeffer notes, infant baptism is impossible.³⁰

Two years after his essay, Bonhoeffer was writing from his prison cell to Eberhard Bethge about the baptism of the latter's son. Although he regarded it appropriate to baptize early in life so as not to take this channel of grace too lightly, he noted that the New Testament laid down no law about infant baptism and "to force oneself to it without the compulsion of faith is not biblical."³¹

²⁷Ibid., pp. 149-150. Bonhoeffer's quotes around the "I" indicate that he is concerned that faith not be considered an eradication of the person. In referring to Gal. 2:20 at this point, he reveals that the "I" which regards itself as instrumental in its own salvation is the "I" of the old Adam, the sinful self, the *cor curvum in se*.

²⁸Ibid., p. 153.

²⁹Ibid., p. 155.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 155-156.

³¹LPP, p. 237.

Neither Bethge's consciousness of his pastoral role nor wartime fears of his son's death was sufficient compulsion.

If faith is to compel baptism, and if that same faith is not an individualistic and other-worldly matter but possesses strong personal, dialogical and communal dimensions, how would Bonhoeffer proceed to deal pastorally with particular requests for infant baptism? Near the conclusion of his 1942 baptismal paper he makes a proposal, drawing together themes we have already noted:

...authentic evangelical baptismal discipline will have to consider whether or not believing godparents and parents are bringing the child to baptism as members of the community. In the first place, it will take baptismal instruction for the

community, godparents and parents, more seriously than hitherto; it will bear witness to the special grace of infant baptism, which may not be dissipated; it will warn against the misuse of baptism and it will, if need be, refuse to baptize infants when it has come to the firm conclusion that baptism is not desired in faith. But it will not allow itself to be guided by any sort of rigorism, but only by the love of God for the world and for his community.³²

Could such love be demonstrated in a refusal to baptize? Bonhoeffer believed so. How he may have formulated the many dimensions of a baptismal discipline probably can be answered in part from his long-standing interest in the early church catechumenate, an interest which surfaced again in his prison years. Specifically, he was intrigued by the secret discipline in which there was both protection for the mysteries of faith and protection for the world from violation by religion.³³ Within the gathered community intrinsic to the secret discipline, the believers would be “driven right back to the beginnings of...understanding.”³⁴ Herein the great doctrines would cease to be mere religious objects, and a new comprehension and even a new language would come to be. One would become Christian as the secret discipline deepened the mysteries of faith beyond a cognitive level to prayer and action.³⁵

Such guidance for persons not truly members of the Christian community—though they themselves were baptized and are now requesting baptism for their own child—would indeed be a caring for them and their salvation. The community must be prepared to offer the avenue and be ready to stand beside them as they take this first step of coming to live in the reality of their own baptism. As Bonhoeffer noted well, this penultimate first step does not save but it matters immensely.³⁶ Coupled with this care, the church must be bold in its preaching of the Gospel that the first step does not deteriorate to the status of a legal requirement to be met.

³²TP, p. 163.

³³Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke and William Glen-Doepel, under the editorship of Edwin Robertson (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 785-786. Whatever interpretations arise from trying to understand Bonhoeffer’s articulation of the secret or arcane discipline, it seems correct and important to this writer to establish their relationship to the pre-Constantinian catechumenate.

³⁴LPP, pp. 299-300. This much-quoted piece from May 1944 is titled (appropriately, considering our purposes!) “Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge.”

³⁵Ibid., p. 300.

³⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge, trans. by Neville Horton Smith (New York: MacMillan Company, 1955), p. 139-141.

Bonhoeffer’s catechumenate calls for the integration of worship and worldly life. For with the gathering of the secret discipline, the call must come to “share in God’s sufferings” through concrete involvement in the problems and possibilities of the human community.³⁷ In the catechumenate, reflections on the mysteries of the faith and response to the concerns of daily life would form a fundamental and pervading dialectic.

Baptism is a response to the Gospel, and a truly evangelical discipline must receive its own shape from the Gospel. For Bonhoeffer, the decision to baptize or not belongs within a context of instruction about the sacrament and a readiness of the church to stand beside and guide

those persons learning to believe. Participants in the catechumenate either hear the Gospel and come to a faith which compels baptism or fail to come to faith and so decide baptism to be inappropriate for them. In either case there is no “religious” coercion.³⁸ Baptism happens in faith as a response to the Word of God’s grace or it should not happen at that time.

A PROPOSAL

The continuity of and the specific movement toward a baptismal discipline in Bonhoeffer’s writings are reflected in the three preceding subtitles corresponding to Bethge’s outline. That movement can be described in another way. The fact that a baptismal discipline is appropriate received its fundamental articulation from the communal, dialogical, and relational nature of faith. The question of when baptismal discipline needs to be employed received the initial test within the context of Bonhoeffer’s pastoral role in the Confessing Church. The framing of how this same discipline might remain evangelically sound took its shape from a fresh reading of the biblical witness and a new statement of the place of the historic catechumenate in a religionless world. Throughout his career and in spite of radically shifting personal circumstances, Bonhoeffer’s advocacy is constant.

For American Lutherans prepared to continue the practice of infant baptism (quite rightly, I would argue) and yet recognizing that they have inherited much of the state church tradition shared by Bonhoeffer, it must be re-emphasized that this German pastor’s proposal is a defense of the baptism of infants. It is a defense established not on general religious grounds, however, but on a concrete, intimate relationship between sacramental action and the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

The purpose is not to purify the church or to mollify the troubled pastoral conscience. The point of a baptismal discipline is that the church might care theologically and pastorally concerning whom it baptizes and under what circumstances—all for the sake of the Gospel. For this reason, the three movements in Bonhoeffer’s development become our questions to which he has provided careful and helpful direction: 1) *on what basis* may we determine the appropriateness of a baptismal discipline; 2) *under what circumstances* is the employment of a

³⁷LPP, p. 370.

³⁸For Bonhoeffer “religion,” in distinction from “faith,” is a negative concept. Clifford Green describes it as an operational but dysfunctional concept manifesting itself as episodic, peripheral, subjective or inward, individualism, other-worldliness, intellectual dishonesty, humiliating, and self-centered; cf. *Sociality*, pp. 310-315. The catechumenate is a means by which faith should become operational.

discipline in order; and 3) *through what means* is a discipline likely to accomplish its intent?

Initially, Lutherans with their strong educational tradition need to break from a trivializing of the sacrament which makes baptismal arrangements by a phone call to the church office. Even a caring visit to the home of the newborn falls far short of what is needed. We educate children for first communion. We confirm our teenagers through special classes. We prepare couples for marriage. Besides renewing congregational education on the sacrament of baptism, we must devise worthy avenues of preparation for all parents anticipating that radical, momentous, once-for-all-time baptism of their child. Being more than the acquisition of a few interesting facts about the sacrament, this education should come to be of such duration and

intensity that it would involve the whole person in the life of the community of believers and in the church's mission in the world. With greater care then, the church would be praying for parents that God "strengthen them in their own Baptism so that they may share eternally with their children the salvation...given them."³⁹

Refusals to baptize would probably remain as few as ever, but postponements may be quite appropriate if they are so pastorally and evangelically framed that the Gospel is given a hearing it would not otherwise have. In any case, the church must never stand indifferently or coldly over those to whom it says "Not now," but must always humbly and caringly stand beside them as persons in need of the same growth in grace from a merciful God. As the concretion of such care, the role of sponsor might be renewed as one of substance. Rather than being selected on the basis of friendship or familial appeasement, these persons would be chosen more deliberately for their maturity in faith and for their ability and willingness to provide practical guidance for the family of the candidate both prior to and following baptism. In all these efforts the love of the world which Bonhoeffer understood as essential to an "authentic evangelical discipline" should be the intention of the baptismal catechumenate in such a way that baptism is desired out of faith itself.

A baptismal discipline takes seriously baptism as a superb evangelism opportunity for the church. The status of the infant or child is affected, of course, but more than this occurs. For parents and sponsors especially, this sacrament and their preparation for it can and ought to be an occasion to remember their own baptism and to affirm their own faith. For every infant baptized into Christ, at least three or four persons responsible for its future should have the chance to hear the Gospel with special depth. That opportunity is too good and too important to overlook. Lutherans in particular ought to greet it with special joy.

³⁹Cf. the service of "Holy Baptism" in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 124.