

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Theological Education¹

— Its Implications for East Asia in the 21st Century —

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Dear President and all the delegates of the General Assembly of the Korean Association of Accredited Theological Schools (KAATS), I bring cordial greetings from President Ryuzo Shima of the Japan Association of Theological Education (JATE), your counterpart in Japan, and from Japan Lutheran College and Theological Seminary in Tokyo, which I serve as President. It is my great honor and pleasure to be here with you at the General Assembly of the KAATS and to be given an opportunity to speak to you. I remember the years I served as Director of JATE and Co-Director of the North East Asia Association of Theological Schools (NEAATS), and of working with Dr. Joon Surh Park of Yonsei University, Director of KAATS and NEAATS, during the years 1991-93, facilitating active cooperation and fellowship among the theological schools in Korea, Taiwan and Japan. It is my sincere wish to revitalize the fellowship between these two organizations of the neighboring countries and to work together for the glory of the Triune God and the mission of the church of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ in this part of the world.

It seems to me that it is not a mere accident for me

to be invited to the G.A. of KAATS in the 70th year after the end of 36 years of colonization, and in the time of establishing a new relationship of substantial reconciliation on the basis of the sincere reflection and apology for the past on my side and generous acceptance on your side, and of the common will for a better future. The churches and their theological education have contributed to, and will keep contributing to the promotion of these efforts.

Bonhoeffer and his introduction to East Asia

Now let me speak about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who is widely known among theologians in Korea, as well as in Japan. It was nearly half a century ago, when I was a university student, that I heard the name of Bonhoeffer for the first time. I learned that along with Martin Luther King, Jr., Bonhoeffer was one of two 20th century martyrs. I learned that Bonhoeffer had been involved in the German church struggle during World War II and was finally executed in the Flossenburg concentration camp, where so many Jews had also been mercilessly killed. Phrases such as the “Barmen Declaration” and “the Church for Others” sounded so attractive to Japanese Christians in the 1960s, including myself, who were seriously pondering the church’s

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responsibility during the Second World War.

The first two of Bonhoeffer's books translated into Japanese were *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*. These books gave the impression that Bonhoeffer was simply a pious Christian who followed Jesus Christ until the end of his earthly life. At this time, *Life Together* became a book that every Christian student and seminarian should read. *The Cost of Discipleship* challenged those who had been nurtured with a tender Christian love and forgiveness, or what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace."

In the early 1970's, Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics* did not have a large impact on the Japanese ethical climate where situational thinking, not "principle" thinking, is dominant. The idea of "the world come of age" and the so-called "Non-religious Christianity" found in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* also did not become an urgent issue, either.

It seems to me that Bonhoeffer has been highly appreciated, read and studied in light of his continuity and complementary nature with the theology of Karl Barth and his commitment to the German church struggle. The main concern for the majority of the followers of Dietrich Bonhoeffer seems to be his ethics, or the way in which his life and death were deeply rooted in his Christology and ecclesiology. The title of the excellent biography, *The Way to Obedience and Resistance*, written in 1964 by Heita Mori, a forerunner of Bonhoeffer study in Japan, clearly demonstrates the unique character of the reception of Bonhoeffer's theology in Japan. Most Bonhoeffer scholars wished to study him as a source of theological inspiration; a foundation and direction for the building up of the Christian church; and as a model of living obedience to the call of Jesus Christ. Along this line of interest in Bonhoeffer, I was told that his books also gave spiritual support

and encouragement to those who were imprisoned during the time of struggle for democratization in Korea during the 1970's. The same thing happened in South Africa where the anti-Apartheid struggle was being severely waged, even in prisons.

It is certainly true that Bonhoeffer's lifelong interest was the complex teaching of the church; namely, what is the church; who is the church; and where is the church. It is also true that his theological search was accompanied by and established on Christology: Who is Jesus Christ for us today. This thematic question is highly theological and very existential, indeed. These themes, which form the *basso continuo*, can be found in his books, articles and letters - from the very first work *Sanctorum Communio* to the final, unfinished and non-systematic ideas scattered in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. This final collection of letters prophetically really gets to the heart of the matter, and one of Bonhoeffer's most important theological contributions may be his emphasis on "the suffering God."

Let us now turn to the essential parts of Bonhoeffer's theology, and then discuss its implications for theological education in East Asia in the 21st century.

The Theology of Bonhoeffer

In the massive biography written by Bonhoeffer's pupil, close friend and colleague, Eberhard Bethge, it is interesting to note the development of Bonhoeffer's life after he entered the University of Tübingen in 1923. Bethge characterizes and gives order to this first stage as: Life as a theologian, then as a Christian, and finally as a contemporary person. Bonhoeffer's motivation to study theology was purely academic or intellectual. He wanted to choose a major that his brothers had not yet studied. The fact

that he completed a doctoral dissertation, *Summa Cum Laude*, under Professor Reinhold Seeberg, however, displays his outstanding academic capability.

Judging from my experience as a theological educator for more than three decades, it is very rare among seminarians or graduate students of theology to begin theological study before that person decides to dedicate their entire life to Jesus Christ as Lord, and enter into the Christian ministry. However, this was the case for Bonhoeffer. I am not arguing that the order should be like Bonhoeffer's case, but I would like to assert that each of these three stages should be included in one's life. Namely, being a Christian, a theologian and a contemporary person, these three reflect a life that follows the Lord, Jesus Christ.

In a Christology lecture delivered in 1933, Bonhoeffer changed the methodological question of Christology from a "what-question" or "how-question" to a "who-question" by arguing that the transcendent *logos* is a person, rather than an idea. One can come to know who Christ is only when one is asked by Christ himself and responds to him. That is the way in which one existentially meets and knows the revelation of God *extra nos*.

Ethics is the book which was posthumously edited and published according to the author's intention, and which contains so many exciting and challenging theological thoughts, though in a fragmented manner. Here we can find Bonhoeffer's answer to the question of who Christ is. Bonhoeffer always uses a three-fold formula. Let me quote some passages from his *Ethics*.

In Jesus Christ we have faith in the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ. In the incarnation we learn of the love of God for His creation; in

the crucifixion we learn of the judgment of God upon all flesh; in the resurrection we learn of God's will for a new world. There could be no greater error than to tear these three elements apart; for each of them comprises the whole. It is quite wrong to establish a separate theology of the incarnation, a theology of the cross, or a theology of the resurrection, each in opposition to the others, by a misconceived absolutization of one of these parts; it is equally wrong to apply the same procedure to a consideration of the Christian life.²

Bonhoeffer maintains the meaning of these three elements for human beings as follows,

Jesus Christ the man—this means that God enters into created reality. It means that we have the right and the obligation to be men before God.

Jesus Christ the crucified—this means that God pronounces its final condemnation on the fallen creation. The rejection of God on the cross of Jesus Christ contains within itself the rejection of the whole human race without exception. The cross of Jesus is the death sentence upon the world.

Jesus Christ who rose again—this means that God out of His love and omnipotence sets an end to death and calls a new creation into life, imparts new life.³

Bonhoeffer concludes therefore, that "Christian life is life with the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ, whose word confronts us in its entirety in the message of the justification of the sinner by grace alone."⁴

In another chapter of the same book, Bonhoeffer defines formation as being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ. This happens not by our efforts but by the work of Jesus Christ itself. He continues to

explain as follows,

To be conformed with the Incarnate—that is to be a real man.

To be formed in the likeness of the Crucified—this means being a man sentenced by God.

To be conformed with the Risen One—that is to be a new man before God.⁵

It is quite clear here that Bonhoeffer appreciated the supreme importance of the doctrine which the Reformer Martin Luther held steadfastly to at the risk of his life, namely, the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. However, the strength of Bonhoeffer's theology is that he does not, at the cost of the social ministry or the works of God's left hand, take sides only with the teaching of redemption or the forgiveness of sin. For him, the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection should not be separated from each other, rather they should be integrated. He writes in his *Ethics* very clearly that "The origin and the essence of all Christian life are compromised in the one process or event which the Reformation called justification of the sinner by grace alone."⁶ He repeats the same thing in a different expression as the ultimate or final word of God. Because of the nature of its contents, he declares that "There is no word of God that goes beyond His mercy. There is nothing that goes beyond a life which is justified before God."⁷ At the same time, he leaves the room for the things before the ultimate, or those things he called the "penultimate." The following concluding remarks must be appreciated in light of the ultimate word of God:

As for the question of the things before the last, it follows from what has been said so far that the Christian life means neither a destruction nor a sanctioning of the penultimate. In Christ the reality of God meets the reality of the world and allows us to share in this real encounter. It is an encounter beyond all radicalism and

beyond all compromise. Christian life is participation in the encounter of Christ with the world.⁸

On this basis we are now sure who Jesus Christ is and how he sees the ultimate things and the penultimate things of the world. We must now ask ourselves where Jesus Christ stands and what he does and also where we are to be and what we are supposed to do. For that purpose we can refer to the very impressive poem in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, entitled "Christians and Pagans."

1.

Men go to God when they are sore bestead,
Pray to him for succor, for his peace, for bread,
For mercy for them sick, sinning, or dead;
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.

2.

Men go to God when he is sore bestead,
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak,
the dead;
Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.

3.

God goes to every man when sore bestead,
Feeds body and spirit with his bread;
For Christians, pagans alike he hangs dead,
And both alike forgiving.⁹

Bonhoeffer tells us where God stands and what he does, and where Christians are to stand and what they are to do. We learn from this poem that God is the suffering God just as he is portrayed in the Bible. This God stands sharing the sorrows and griefs of all people non-Christian and Christian. More than that, he feeds their "body and spirit with his bread." He not only forgives their sin but also helps them live life as a humanity created and sustained by God. The place where Christians stand

is “by God in his hour of grieving.” They stand by the suffering Christ. Bonhoeffer lived a life just like the life described in this poem by being obedient to and following after the suffering Jesus Christ; by participating in the German church struggle and the conspiracy against Hitler; and by sharing Christ’s life and death in suffering alongside the Jews and other oppressed people.

The brief sentences in his letter to his friend Eberhard Bethge dated July 16th and 18th, 1944 articulate his fundamental belief regarding the Christian life in relation to “the suffering God”:

He (God) is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8.17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering...The Bible directs man to God’s powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.¹⁰

Man is summoned to share in God’s sufferings at the hands of a godless world...It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life.¹¹

One more teaching of Bonhoeffer to be remembered is that of the four mandates given by God to humanity. Those mandates are labor, marriage, government and the Church. According to Bonhoeffer, man participates in the action of creation through the labor instituted in Paradise. With the mandate of marriage man enters into the will of the Creator in sharing in the process of creation. The divine mandate of government is meant to maintain the world for the reality of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer argues that the divine mandate of the Church, which is different from the above three, is the task of enabling the reality of Jesus Christ to

become real in the preaching and organization of the Church and the Christian life. This mandate is concerned with the eternal salvation of the whole world. In this sense the Church has a unique mandate. To use the Luther’s understanding of the Law and Gospel, the first three mandates belong to the realm of Law, and the fourth mandate of the Church belongs to the realm of Gospel. However, this mandate also impinges upon the other three mandates because labor, marriage and government are concerned with the whole person before God.

All these thoughts of Bonhoeffer have something to do with theological education in our region of the world today, because the latter is not a matter of form or method *per se* but of content. The mission of the Church, and its understanding, makes theological education authentic, useful and efficient today.

Bonhoeffer and Theological Education

According to his biographical record Bonhoeffer spent ten years as a theological teacher. He took the office of lecturer at the faculty of theology at Berlin University August 1st, 1931, but taught only four semesters until the end of the summer semester of 1933. His authorization to teach at the university was withdrawn in 1936. Instead of teaching at a national university, he was assigned to be the director of a preacher’s seminary in Zingsthoof, then Finkenwalde in 1935, and continued to do so even after the compulsory closing of Finkenwalde, continuing until 1940 when collective pastorates in Koeslin and Gross-Schloenwitz were also closed.

Though he was engaged in highly academic lectures and seminars in Berlin University for a short time, he dedicated himself to more fruitful and meaningful theological education toward those who had already graduated from university and had committed themselves to serve as pastors of the

German Confessing Church, which emphasized “life together,” until the *Gestapo* forced the seminary to close after only a few years. Daily devotion and meditation were the part of the life and, though not welcomed by students at the beginning, Bonhoeffer even introduced mutual confession of sin. He also proposed to establish a House of Brethren in 1935. The small but inspirational book entitled *Life Together*, published in 1938, reflects the real and ideal life at the preacher’s seminary. The theological statements below are the fruits of their life together.

The Christian cannot simply take for granted the privilege of living among other Christians. The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.

Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God’s Word to them...

They need other Christians as bearers and proclaimers of the divine word of salvation...

The Christ in their own hearts is weaker than the Christ in the word of other Christians.

It is essential for Christian community that two things become clear right from the beginning. First, Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality; second, Christian community is a spiritual and not a psychic reality.¹²

His students all learned these words, not through books, but in their lived experience together. This is something that we really do need in our theological education for the purpose of ministerial formation. Without a real and living experience of spiritual discipline, it is not easy for the seminarian to distinguish between cheap grace and costly grace that Bonhoeffer mentions in *The Cost of Discipleship*. We must rediscover and develop the importance of the experience of life together in the context

of theological education. The impressive phrase coined in the proposal of establishing a House for Brethren, “Inner concentration for service outside to others,” should not be underestimated.

It goes without saying that theological education does not simply rely on experience. A sound and stoutly-built theological foundation is necessary, especially including the foundations of Christology and Ecclesiology. In this sense, Bonhoeffer’s theological backbone of a three-fold Christology should be held in high esteem, for it enables us to develop the Doctrine of Creation about salvation and a new and eternal life to be completed in the *eschaton*. It also maintains the essential and ultimate value of the Doctrine of Justification by grace alone through faith alone, without losing a commitment to the penultimate or a multi-dimensional responsibility to the life in this world. It makes possible the establishment of a theology of *Missio Dei* which enhances both *kerygma* or proclamation, and *diakonia* or social service.

Contemporary societies in Korea, Japan and the coastal regions of China display extreme economic growth; highly developed information technology; many merits and demerits of global economy, including the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor; many serious problems related to rapidly aging or aged societies; high rates of suicide; uncontrollable climate change and natural disasters caused by abnormal climate change. Bonhoeffer, who challenged and encouraged others to live life - a secular life - in this world, also challenges and encourages us to tackle these kinds of tough issues in our own contemporary world. Bonhoeffer emphasized the reality in which Jesus Christ stands by suffering people, and invites us to be obedient to this suffering God. In this way he *re-presented* the life of Jesus Christ who became incarnate, who was

crucified and who rose again.

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer that drafted “the Confession of the Sin of the Church.” He was tremendously influential upon the German church’s confession of the sin of the church after World War II, and also upon the confessions of sin and wartime responsibility of the United Church of Christ in Japan (UCCJ=*Kyodan*) in 1967 and those of other denominations. It is obvious that without a sincere confession of sin and apology to the people in neighboring countries there is no hope of true reconciliation. There is much to learn from Bonhoeffer as an advocate for peace and justice. We would therefore like to reevaluate the implications of the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as one who dedicated his own life to the mission of Jesus Christ, who stood with those who suffer, and who emphasized this within theological education - which is our common mission here in this East Asia today.

Thank you very much for attention and for your invitation to speak today.

Note

- 1 This article is the text of a guest lecture delivered at the General Assembly of the Korean Association of Accredited Theological Schools (KAATS) held at Yonsei University in Seoul on March 27th, 2015. At this meeting, about 100 leaders of the theological colleges and departments of theology of universities in Korea attended. KAATS consists of the North East Asia Association of Theological Schools (NEAATS) along with the Japan Association of Theological Education (JATE) and the Taiwan Association of Theological Education (TATE), which had been in active cooperation and fellowship in the field of theological education. However, NEAATS has been inactive for many years. Owing to the decision of the board of directors, the author was invited to attend the meeting and given the opportunity to speak. That this could be an opportunity to restart cooperation would be a great joy for the author who once served as the Co-Director of NEAATS.
- 2 本稿は筆者が2015年3月27日に韓国ソウル市にある延世大学を会場にして開かれた韓国神学教育連合会 Korean Association of Accredited Theological Schools (KAATS) の2015年度総会に招待されて、約100人の韓国の神学大学あるいは総合大学神学部の責任者たちの前で講演したものの原稿である。KAATSは日本神学教育連合会(JATE)と台湾神学教育連合会(TATE)と共に東北アジア神学教育連合会(NEAATS)を構成し、神学教育の分野における協力と協働を永らくやっていたが、NEAATSはここ暫く活動が途絶えていた。KAATS役員会の決断で筆者が総会に招待され講演の機会を与えられたことがきっかけとなって、共同活動の再開の兆しが見えてきたことは、かつてNEAATSのCo-Directorを務めたことのある筆者にとって大きな喜びである。
- 3 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Ethics*. Macmillan Paperback Edition, 1965, pp.130-31.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp.131-32.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.132.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 80-82.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.120.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.123.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.133.
- 10 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Macmillan Pub. (the enlarged edition) 1972, pp.348-49.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp.360-61.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.361.
- 13 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 5). Fortress Press, 1996, pp.27-35.