

Participation: Ecclesial Praxis with a Crucified God for the World

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Introduction

Theology is a participation in God that takes shape in unique praxis of the church. *Theosis*, participating in the divine life rather than in human potential, “is closely bound up with being ‘in Christ’ going back to the early Greek fathers” (Grenz 2001, 325). Oxford theologian Paul Fiddes speaks of pastors as “living sacraments” (2000, 302) who can open doors for others into eternal movements of love and justice like an invitation to dance, but sometimes like the raw edges of a wound. He speaks of an extravagant generosity of divine love that will not be satisfied with anything less than identification with a finite body. Along with that particularity of Jesus of Nazareth, he speaks of incarnation “as we participate in God, there is always a particular ‘yes’ in which human daughters and sons make their ‘yes’ to the creative love of God” (301). As “living symbols” of the sacrificial love of Christ, Fiddes views the vocational pastoral call as a way of being, not just an exercise of skills or the carrying out of a set of functions. The goal of every Christian liturgy goes beyond getting people *to* the altar, “it’s about getting them *on* the altar.”¹ Fiddes’ pastoral model may be extended to those priests as disciples whose new creaturehood derives from a historical killing of sheep incarnated in a daily dying to self-centeredness through the cross. In taking a path from experience to doctrine we retrace a journey that God has already taken towards us. Theology is doxology...worship called out from those who have received the self-offering and self-opening of the triune God.

Participation as a theological category is important in today’s contemporary discourse involving God, the human being and the church. Methodologically, its experiential point of departure retains orthodoxy, unlike 20th century reduction of Christianity to philosophical abstractions of glory. Participation as a theological category creates space for an indigenous theology of the cross which offers a faith involving the courage to have failed, not merely the courage to be. No thinking person can honestly assess the tragedy of the 20th century, with its religious optimism and triumphalism, as a period of time when the American dream was sustained. Cultural Christianity constructed on Constantine’s God of glory is unable to describe the way things are in the world after 9/11. The God who failed in Jesus of Nazareth by going into the darkness identifies with persons recovering from the illusion of the *via affirmativa*.

¹ Dr. Richard Bliese, Mission Leadership Seminar, Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, June 17–21, 2002.

Theologically, a gospel of the cross retains the “already-not yet” dialectic—a must-have if Christianity is to be Christian. A gospel of glory is satisfied to herald the “already” with no way to help human beings work through failure. The cruciform community—the concrete expression of a suffering Lord on earth—is comprised of forgiven failures, not religious optimists of glory. It is important for theology and the church to become partners again, even if that partnership challenges the triumphalism lingering around professional emanations of the local church intoxicated by a North American corporate success model. For Christian community to survive the 21st century, it must never forget its Hebraic roots in a suffering God who experienced the public failure associated with dying on a Roman instrument of torture simultaneously displaying the love of God for the world. This essay seeks to develop a theological approach to *participation* within a postmodern context characterized “by the loss of the self coupled with a quest for relationality in community” (Grenz 2001, 12). First, a textual analysis of *participation* including its exegesis in key texts is offered. Secondly, *participation* is reviewed as to its theological usage within 20th century Protestant thought represented by Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer including a critique of each from appropriate sources. Finally, a comparative analysis of Tillich and Bonhoeffer will conclude the essay with summary thoughts on how *participation* may help support ecclesial praxis where theology is once again viewed as church practice (Huetter 2000, xiv).

The thesis of this paper is that *only a personal, loving crucified God who suffers with and for humanity creates space for a theological view of participation incarnated by a cruciform community in the world led by a powerless Christ.*

Textual Analysis

Just as any context requires its own language to think and speak of God given its experience of God, the early fathers found impersonal words from Hellenism inadequate to express their new-found personal relationship with God through the crucified-risen Jesus of Nazareth. Technically, they “moved back in thought from the ‘economic Trinity’ to the ‘immanent Trinity,’ or from the activity of God in ordering the household...to the being of God within God’s own self” (Fiddes 2000, 6). As Eberhard Juengel states, they came to know that “God corresponds to himself” (Juengel 1976, 24). They viewed their experience of themselves and others as cooperators with a God who is present in the world. Or, stated another way, “as coauthors with God in the next chapter of human history.”² To such new language suggested by an analysis of the word *participation* we now turn.

The English word *participation* derives from two Latin words: “pars + ceps” which equate to “part + taking.” When smoothed from the literal, the definition is rendered as “to take part, to

² From a sermon by Rev. Robin Currie, Grace Lutheran Church, Glen Ellyn, Ill., January 12, 2003.

join or share with others, to share in or to partake of.”³*Participation* often translates the Greek “koinonia”⁴ where the experience of the early church, according to the Apostle Paul, was a “fellowship of participating (sharing) in Christ’s sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). Paul here uses language to express a new-found relationship with God through Jesus in an ongoing relational way. This personal relationship cannot be reduced to language indicating the gaining of new facts *about* Christ, but developing a better relationship *with* Christ. Further, along with Fiddes’ idea of “experience to doctrine,” within a context of revelation, the Apostle speaks a language of knowing Christ which is continuing and originated by God in the life of the Christian, as given by both the present tense and passive voice of the participle “being conformed to the death” in its association with “koinonia.” For first century Christianity, this would be new existential language required by a radically different spiritual experience of participation with God.

Participation in both secular and sacred Greek sets a needed context prior to construction of a theology. In secular Greek *participation* derives from “common” related to ownership of property within a true social order. “Common” from a Hebrew context, beyond the above economic idea, denotes the “profane,” or “accessible and permissible to all” contrasted to the holy. Compared to the East, the Greek poets and philosophers had strong instincts for the common good. Communal economies were created in Sparta and Crete; Pythagoras fashioned a communal order for his disciples. Plato’s Athens has no private property...in perfect community of goods the people live contentedly on the labor of all. Within Jewish society, Philo and Josephus describe the achievement of community of goods in the order of the Essenes.⁵ With Jesus, a new notion of “common” emerges.

A subjective sense of “common” characterizes the hapless band of nervous followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Something beyond economic or legal occurs in the spontaneous expression of the early church community. Hellenist Luke describes in Acts 2 the evolution of a community which has no parallel in current Graeco-Roman culture, nor precedent within Hebraic Judaism and occurs no where else in the New Testament.

A notion from *fellowship*, sharing with someone or in something, sets a context for “koinonia” in New Testament usage. *Participant* expresses inner relationship. It is two-sided in giving and receiving. At the human level, friendship is expressed. In sacred language, there is direct union with the deity in eating and drinking. In Homer, persons are invited as companions to the table of the gods. Greek mysticism conceives of a general fellowship between persons and

³ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. William Morris (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 955.

⁴ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. Arndt & Gingrich (London: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 440.

⁵ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:789–796.

god which stresses union with deity. Just the opposite is true within a Hebraic view of fellowship. In the Hebrew *participation* is always at the horizontal person-person relationship; maybe union with the gods, *but never with God*. The prophet condemns Ephraim who, in adultery against God, join themselves to the gods of alien cults (Hos. 4:17). There is only distance between the person and God in the Old Testament. The righteous Israelite never regards herself as the companion of God. Even with a believed participation of God in the sacral fellowship of sprinkling blood on the altar, “there is no express statement concerning fellowship with God in the cultic meal” (*TDNT*, 3:802). Philo finds a transformation of *participant* which blends both Greek and Hebraic ideas as distinctive from ordinary Hebraic or typically Hellenistic usage. “Philo speaks of a close fellowship between the righteous and God in the sacrificial meal...as the ideal common life of the Essenes with its full community of goods...In Philo, ‘fellowship’ is used in the sense of ‘giving a share’ which is rare in the secular Greek (*TDNT*, 3:803). Just as Jesus transforms the usage of “common,” there is a similar categorical shift in *participation* from Hebraic distancing, or mystical Hellenistic union with the deity. The Apostle Peter speaks of the Christian as a “divine-sharer” or “participant in the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). Redemption is presented as a liberation from the natural corruption of earth to participation in the divine nature. The Petrine correspondence speaks of Christ’s sufferings as a nature of the divine creating space for the crucified God considered in this essay to be a criterion for Christian theology.

The *participation*-family of words occurs most frequently in Paul for whom the word has significant spiritual content. While not venturing to speak of direct participation with God, he speaks of Christ as mediator. “In 1 Corinthians 1:9, Christians are called to fellowship (participation) with the son...to be His co-participants...to enter into spiritual communion with a risen Lord...There is no mystical Hellenistic absorption here, but rather a participation in Christ which arises only through faith” (*TDNT*, 3:804). Furthermore, fellowship in Christ implies participation in the Gospel. The Christian identifies her life with Jesus Christ. Fellowship *in* and *with* Christ is nuanced with Paul regarding its usage relative to the Lord’s Supper.

Participation in Christ, which is known basically and perfectly in faith, is achieved and experienced in enhanced form with no dogmatic implication, in the sacrament. For Paul being a “participant in the altar” equates in the Jewish sacrificial feast to having communion with God; being a “participant of the demons” is what one becomes when partaking in pagan feasts. “By analogy, those who partake of the Lord’s Supper are Christ’s companions...with his body and blood...expressive of an inner union...as a celebration of forgiveness won by Christ’s death” (*TDNT*, 3:805). But the Apostle Paul is not satisfied only with eucharistic language which may limit Christian participation in Christ to a *ritual*; for him it must be a participation in the *life* of a crucified God.

According to Paul fellowship with Christ also means that the Christian participates in the detailed phases of the life of Christ. As noted above, spiritual union with Christ is described in

terms of fellowship in suffering with Him. This is not just a living again of Christ's sufferings, nor is it a merely personal conformity or retrospective passion dogmatics. By spiritual participation in Christ the sufferings of the apostle are a real part of the total suffering which is laid on Christ. This statement is crucial to the thesis of this analysis. That is, in more than a theoretical, religious or retrospective way, the Apostle's participation in suffering with Christ on behalf of his friends in Colosse is a way in which he really joins Christ in completing, as a member of Christ's body, the physical suffering on behalf of others. The Colossians 1:24 text is pivotal to constructing a theology of participation from the biblical witness where present, real-time fellowship with Christ is discovered in those concrete acts of suffering for others begun and modeled in the vicarious atonement of Christ for sinners. The thrust of the text is not that the vicarious death of Christ was inadequate to achieve reconciliation with God. Rather Colossians 1:24 speaks of the ongoing action authored by God among his reconciled cruciform community, the church, to continue the process of redemption as the ordinary incarnate of activity of being in the world for others. Based upon both the necessity and the sufficiency of Christ's death for sinners, forgiven human beings may be said to continue the process of redeeming love begun and modeled by their Lord and brother Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ of faith. This text forms the basis from the biblical witness for what may be termed a theology of participation. Further, there is communal implication for the church, as the infleshed body of Christ on earth, to bear a certain degree of the sufferings. "For Paul the sufferings which he has to endure as an individual are a gladly accepted shouldering of part of the burden which lies on the whole" (TDNT, 3:806). Just as the Philippians 3:10 text discusses the mutuality of participation in both sufferings and power, so also the Apostle in the Corinthians correspondence expresses a similar suffering-comfort mutuality together with the fellow participants from this church community. In the writing of Paul, the participation of the disciple also extends to a participation, not only with Jesus Christ, but also with the Holy Spirit.

"Partaking of the Spirit is also a mark of the Christian" (TDNT, 3:807). As stated earlier, the early Christians with the later leaders of the church needed a vocabulary commensurate with their radically new personal relationship with God through the crucified-risen Jesus. The triadic grace of Christ-love of God-fellowship of the Holy Spirit is but one expression of such new language. It is the language of engagement and participation with God. The triadic usage here is significant, not only because it involves the Holy Spirit, but moreso because it models the expression of tri-unity among the members of the Godhead who possess a dynamic interrelationship among themselves. In sum, from the above etymological and textual analysis of *participation* emerges a crucified God with whom a cooperating restored community is in new relation. We've observed how relationality sets the context for a theological understanding of *participation*. We've noted how an etymology of participation connotes a life-orientation in cooperation with God rather than cognitive knowledge about God. Finally, while adequate discussion of *perichoresis* is beyond the scope of this paper, we've seen a relationship between sound theological and biblical

understanding of *participation* and a dynamic interrelationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We now investigate how 20th century Protestantism considered *participation* theologically. In so doing, we'll note how modernity's influence on Protestantism's hermeneutic of the biblical witness framed *participation* as either religious philosophy or Christian theology.

20th Century Protestant Theological Use of *Participation*

To focus on how theological discourse of the turbulent 20th century viewed *participation*, we select two names from Protestant thought: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich. Bonhoeffer first used *participation* theologically in his famous prison letters in 1945; Tillich made widespread use of *participation* throughout his systematic theology of culture and correlation. While each attempted to discuss Christian theology during a world come of age, each scholar had his own methodology. Both recognized the need for a new language to communicate theological truth when addressing the urgencies of nonreligious persons within a post-Christian culture. We begin by analyzing Tillich's methodology and use of *participation* in his systematic theology and other writings.

Paul Tillich's Method and Use of Participation

In his correlation of "God" with essential being, "Christ" with estranged existence, and "Spirit" with the ambiguities of life, Paul Tillich first mentions *participation* in 1947 in an essay, "The Problem of Theological Method." At the heart of his methodology is "a genuine pragmatism which refuses to close any door" (Herberg 1958, 263). Tillich's theological thought as early as the late 1940s is based upon a presupposition he established in his essay. "Since I am convinced that Christianity is able to take all possible elements of religious truth into itself without ceasing to be Christianity, I am going to speak now about Christian theology, as the only one which is within my essential reach" (265).

Given the above context within this essay on Tillich's method, "God" becomes the correlate to human anxiety and contingency; the symbol of 'transcendent courage,' where loneliness is overcome; the idea of God receives existential significance and the intensely meaningful question concerning our participation in the divine life is raised.

Tillich continued his use of *participation* in his 1952 best-seller *The Courage To Be*. Here he points his readers to 'the god beyond God,' the creative power of being in which all creatures participate." Tillich opts for this concept of "god" based upon his departure from what he considers faulty transcendent theism which he says is "irrelevant... one-sided.... wrong.... and is bad theology" (155). Tillich's abstract language for God is exemplified in phrases like "God as the principle of participation, God as 'being-itself.' For everything that is participates in being-itself, and everybody has some awareness of this participation, especially in the moments in which he

experiences the threat of nonbeing. Tillich's alternative to the so-called God of faulty theism is the God above the God of Theism who unites and transcends the courage to be as a part of the courage to be as oneself avoiding both the loss of oneself by participation and the loss of one's world by individualization.

"The principle of participation drives us one step further. God himself is said to participate in the negatives of creaturely existence...the doctrine that God the Father has suffered in Christ rightly was rejected by the early church" (Tillich 1951, 1:270). Tillich's God as being-itself transcends nonbeing. Tillich's "God" does not stand in private relation to man but represents the universal order and cannot show sentimental love to his children. His "God above God" has its philosophical counterpart in the New Being to continue looking at how Tillich uses *participation* with Jesus Christ.

"The participation in Jesus takes place not in the realm of contingent human individualism, but in the reality of his own participation in God, a participation which has a universality in which everyone can participate...in terms of personal participation in his being, we do not know anyone better because his being is the New Being which is universally valid for every human being" (Tillich 1957, 2:219). Paul Tillich's "Jesus" is created and not the biblical Jesus. He who participates in the newness of being which is in Christ has become a new creature. It is a creative act by which this happens. Inasmuch as Jesus as the Christ is a creation of the divine Spirit, so is he who participates in the Christ made into a new creature by the Spirit, states Tillich.

Tillich speaks of Jesus' participation in existential estrangement and his participation in the ambiguities of life. He states that if Jesus as the Christ were seen as a God walking on earth, he would be neither finite nor involved in tragedy. He concludes his "christology" with a series of principles for the doctrine of atonement. For our purposes, we consider his last three statements employing *participation*: Must be understood as God's participation in existential estrangement. The location of divine participation in existential estrangement becomes manifest in Christ's cross. Through participation in the New Being, persons also participate in the manifestation of the atoning act of God.

God's atoning activity must be understood as his participation in existential estrangement and its self-destructive consequences. Paul Tillich says he is in the very heart of the doctrine of atonement with this statement. He asks what it means that God takes the suffering of the world upon himself by participation in existential estrangement. He calls the cross the central actualization, or effective manifestation, of God's participation in the suffering of the world. But what is constitutive of God's suffering here? Is it a 'bearing of our sins in his body'? Is it a carrying of our diseases? No. the guilty conscience which looks at the Cross sees God's atoning act in it and through it, namely his taking the destructive consequences of estrangement upon himself. For Tillich, the Cross is not the cause but the effective manifestation of God's taking the consequences of human guilt upon himself.

For him, the saving power of the New Being in Jesus as the Christ is dependent on man's participation in it. Quite rightly, Tillich here is reacting against emotional conversion appeals from a brand of pietism which fails to speak of an ongoing responsible commitment to continue a participatory relationship in Christ. He critiques a form of fundamentalism or evangelicalism which reduces the Christian "experience" to an emotionally induced "conversion" which fails to "take" in real participatory living in Christ as the new reality. Having reviewed Tillich's use of *participation* within God as being-itself and with Jesus, the New Being, we focus upon how he speaks of *participation* with the Spirit and the Kingdom in his pneumatology.

Paul Tillich's use of *participation* in his pneumatology occurs within an ontological polarity of "individualization and participation" of a life function he calls self-integration, or morality. Tillich's third volume continues his philosophical theology of culture "through a doctrine of the Spirit and of the Kingdom of God that presents the Divine Spirit as working in and with the structures of all life functions" (Taylor 1991, 233).

Under the rubric of ambiguity, he speaks of individualization and centeredness as the first of the polarities of structure of being. "For where there is a center, there is a periphery which includes an amount of space...which unites a manifoldness of elements. This corresponds to participation, with which individualization forms a polarity" (Tillich 1963, 3:33). He speaks of one's participation as a universal potential where through *eros* one may participate in the universe in all its dimensions and draw elements of it into himself. The process of self-integration is a moving between the center and the manifoldness (participation) which is taken into the center. Tillich's use of *participation* within the psychological realm includes the basic movement of going out of and returning to itself in immediate experience and a polarity of self and environment corresponding to the model of individualization and participation under review.

He speaks of community as the location where self-integration of the person as a person occurs. The community itself is a phenomenon of life which has analogies in all realms implied by the polarity of individualization and participation—there is no self-transcendence of life except through the polar interdependence of individualization and participation. In an unusually positive reference to transcendence, Tillich speaks of *participation* in a transcendent union within the human spirit as the ecstatic movement called 'faith' and 'love'. He views the Spiritual Presence (Holy Spirit?) manifest as love where it creates agape as unambiguous love an impossibility for the human spirit by itself.

As faith, the Spiritual Presence is an ecstatic participation of the finite spirit in the transcendent unity of unambiguous life. His statements in this context hint of his church theology, from which he appears at points inseparable, compared to his dominant theme of self-transcendence and the ambiguity of life throughout his pneumatology. Combining his notion of the Spiritual Presence with community, he speaks of the marks of Spiritual Community. The Spiritual Community is holy, participating through faith in the holiness of the Divine Life.

Continuing a discussion of the church and the experience of the New Being, he authenticates experience as the subjective side; that is, the state of being grasped by the Spiritual Presence. Donning his church theologian hat, Tillich speaks of being born anew as a “not yet”—the entering of a new reality with future implications. “Participating in the New Being does not automatically guarantee that one is new” (3:222). Reflecting on the paradox of justification prior to regeneration from the Reformation, participation in the New Being, the creation of the Spirit, is the first element in the state of the individual in the church in so far as it is the actualization of the Spiritual Community.

Tillich speaks of suffering as participation. “Christianity has always claimed that neither the death of the Christ nor the suffering of Christians is tragic, because neither is rooted in the affirmation of its greatness but in the participation in the predicament of estranged man to which each belongs...Christianity teaches that the Christ and martyrs suffered...not based on the tragic guilt of self-affirmed greatness but on their willingness to participate in the tragic consequences of human estrangement” (3:244). Finally, in his analysis of the Kingdom of God within history, Tillich employs the language of participation to promote the individual’s need to engage history. It is not a victory of the Kingdom of God in history if the individual tries to take himself out of participation in history in the name of the transcendent Kingdom of God. He links sacrifice and personal fulfillment as a victory of the Kingdom where human destiny is directly determined by active participation as ultimate meaning.

Few 20th century theologians used participation more frequently to think and speak of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit than Paul Tillich. In his well-intended desire to converse in a theology of culture with a society come of age, we’ve noted how *participation* is operative within his methodology of correlation. But is Tillich’s a Christian theology? What deficiency in a theology which is Christian necessitates his method of correlation such that his abstractions of deity make his use of *participation* meaningful? What inadequacy in “participating in the sufferings of Christ” from the biblical witness is improved by “participating in the tragic consequences of human estrangement” from Tillich’s existentialist language? To address these and other concerns, we shift from a statement of Paul Tillich’s methodology and use of *participation* to a critique of both in conversation with two other voices.

Critique of Paul Tillich’s Methodology and Use of Participation

We conclude our review of Paul Tillich with a critique to indicate how his attempt falls prey to the risk of not doing *Christian* theology. We find British theologian Paul Fiddes and Bonhoeffer scholar Charles Marsh as conversation partners in an assessment of both Tillich’s methodology and use of *participation*. Using *theologia crucis* language, Paul Fiddes challenges Tillich’s method of movement from the existential to the ontological from an impersonal God as being-itself who

really participates in the self-destructive consequences of our estranged existence. For Fiddes, Tillich's God, "who rightly directs our attention to the relation of the finite, negates the finite when he participates in it" (Fiddes 1992, 260). Fiddes alludes to a crucified God, who, rather than negating the finite, is humble enough to hide his glory within it. In a section of his book entitled, "Non-Being Activates the Divine Life: Paul Tillich," Fiddes notes that Tillich's use of symbols is confusing. He says it is never clear in Tillich's presentation whether 'being-itself' as well as 'God' is only a symbol for ultimate reality. As to Tillich's method of movement from thought to reality (from the existential to the ontological), he finds theodicy as Tillich's underlying motif where it seems clear that our encounter with non-being is only tolerable, and we can only draw the courage-to-be from the ground of being, if that which is our ultimate concern is also meeting and conquering non-being.

Fiddes doubts whether Tillich's God really suffers as a participant in the negativities of our creaturely existence. Does Tillich present a way to think of a God whose experience is analogous to our experience of facing death? Fiddes says no. In a careful analysis of Tillich's use of non-being and Tillich's language where existence is estranged from essence, God is beyond the contrast between essence and existence, transcending even essence, and so the non-being he apparently takes into himself is of the most neutral and harmless kind. So we are not surprised to find that Tillich is highly critical of patripassianism, that God the Father suffered in Christ. Fiddes suggests that Tillich undermines a personal crucified God "by his conception of God as being-itself, which transcends the fulfillment and non-fulfillment of reality and so makes it difficult to speak of desire in God" (Fiddes 2000, 253–54). He reminds the reader that in the act of loving the Son, God freely chooses a covenant with humanity and all the suffering that entails—suffering then is implicit in the very desire of God for fellowship not a negative life force which God 'overcomes' within himself.

Further, Tillich's inability to posit Personality as the final definition for God detracts from the content in his perception of the atonement as *participation*. He finds that Tillich's use of *participation* when speaking of the atonement is confused by his riddle of the Fall. Tillich's confusion over the Fall as movement from essence to existence as story rather than dialectical step where in his system existence is estranged from essence has further problems. What concerns us even more here is that the scheme makes it difficult to see how God can participate in the self-destructive consequences of our estranged existence and as being-itself transcending both essence and existence. Fiddes points out with precision how Tillich's method breaks down at this point where we have the curious situation on the one hand of giving cogency to the idea of God's suffering, but on the other hand excluding God from encountering it—an inherently contradictory outcome.

Fiddes also finds Tillich's method problematic in how Jesus negates finitude as the New Being while participating in the blessedness of God (Schleiermacher) and the eternal victory of being over

non-being. Jesus for Tillich is the one whose communion with God is unbroken, whose serenity and majesty are fully intact as he cries out to a forsaking Father on the cross. Whether Tillich conceives of Jesus as historical, a literal person, or merely a portrait of manhood, “there is a diminishing of the notion of the suffering of God....essential being surely cannot appear under the conditions of existence without estrangement, and yet still be said to suffer risks” (Fiddes 2000, 259).

Fiddes offers an alternative to Tillich’s *philosophia gloriae* channeled through *via affirmativa*. A God who opens himself to suffering through his own desires can willingly identify himself with estranged humanity, and feel the impact of hostile non-being in a more real way than he would by merely overcoming a vital non-being within himself. Fiddes’ Jesus is the human being *on* the cross at Golgotha, not a philosophical construction *behind* the Roman tool of death. “What matters is what Jesus makes of estrangement growing in trustful obedience through moments of broken communion, not his exemption from it. God...in...Christ undergoes utter despair, disruption of fellowship, shattering of blessedness, and total desolation” (260).

To summarize Fiddes’ critique, while Paul Tillich has rightly focused upon God’s relation to the finite, his God as Being-itself negates the finite when he participates in it. With Paul Fiddes we find a personal crucified God’s participation with finitude as the humble *Deus absconditus* from a *theologia crucis* who, in Jesus of Nazareth, dies for sinners. Fiddes finds Tillich’s theodicy-based view limiting human encounter with non-being to a courageous coping, not a conquering. Because Tillich employs an abstruse use of symbolism, Fiddes questions whether his impassible being-itself can really experience death as the crucified God of *theologia crucis* known through *via negativa*.

A second critical voice is Charles Marsh, who finds in Dietrich Bonhoeffer a mediating voice between Barth’s positivism and Tillich’s ontology. “Bonhoeffer lays out a new synthesis that avoids a correlation method as commonly conceived” (1994, 59). In a statement of Bonhoeffer’s Christological redescription of philosophy, Marsh discusses Tillich and Bonhoeffer in a section called “Theology’s Internal Correlation.” He names the method of correlation, which moves from philosophical questioning to theological answering, the motor of philosophical theology. Marsh references Tillich’s claim that theology needs philosophy for the reason that any interpretation of the meaning and structure of being as being unavoidably has consequences for the interpretation of God, man and the world in their interrelations. Marsh disagrees. By determining that Bonhoeffer’s method cannot be called correlation even though his theology answers the questions of philosophy, Marsh points out how Tillich and Bonhoeffer differ methodologically. He asserts that according to Bonhoeffer, theology always works in light of the presuppositions of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ unpreconditioned by philosophical reasoning and bound to the confession that God reconciled the world to himself in Jesus Christ. Marsh goes on to show that such a confession, while neither anticipated nor contradicted by experience empowers *its own* questions. Tillich’s conclusion tying meaning to revelation’s answers only as a function of their correlation to the questions of existence is rejected.

Secondly, even if a correlation *does* exist between theology and philosophy such correlation is possible only on the terms established by theology; that is, the correlation is internal to theology. So, Bonhoeffer's Christology inverts the method of correlation. Philosophical concepts are restructured in light of Christ and revelation. That the Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth—that God was crucified on Golgotha and that the body of Jesus was physically raised from death provide a unitary epistemology abolishing rigid dualisms between God and the world, including any bifurcation between theology and other vocabularies of correlation. Marsh indicates that while philosophy of religion must determine its own criteria of truth, the Logos of God, which is self-grounding in God's own act, proceeds from the reality of God. Theology cannot be mistaken for either *Glaubenslehre* [religious dogma] or philosophy of religion. Marsh points out that Bonhoeffer's method of internal theological correlation captures Tillich's intent of a theology of culture by "propelling the disciple into the very heart of worldliness" (1994, 62) without trading off the *extra nos* of God's promise.

To conclude, from both Paul Fiddes and Charles Marsh, a historic Christology not only renders a method of correlation as unnecessary, but inverts it by beginning from revelation and *then* proceeding to a reconfiguration of philosophical concepts. That is, Tillich has not demonstrated that deficiency within Christian theology which makes his method of correlation necessary. Clearly, his philosophical overlay onto Christianity doesn't approximate Juengel's "more than necessary" God to be discussed below. Tillich's ideas of philosophical being-itself are incapable of humanly experiencing death for persons, even if his articulation of participation is frequently from church theology. His "created Jesus" as the immanent New Being solves no problem introduced into history by the Incarnation. Tillich's reduction of Christianity to a treatment of symptoms fails to deal with root causes of existential estrangement. His "wiser" ontological view of the cross removing *scandal* exemplifies what the Apostle had in mind when predicting how Greeks would find the salvific death of someone from Nazareth foolish. To discover more about how theology may fulfill its primary responsibility as ecclesial praxis, we now consider how Dietrich Bonhoeffer uses *participation* as a theological paradigm from a crucified God who is present for a cruciform community in the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Method and Use of Participation

We begin our analysis of Bonhoeffer with his own critique of Paul Tillich's method and theology. Parenthetically, no critique of Bonhoeffer's theology⁶ by Paul Tillich is documented in the

⁶ Biographer Eberhard Bethge does mention comments by Tillich related to Bonhoeffer's suitability for an American position working with German refugees: "Tillich was even more enthusiastic about Bonhoeffer than I and stated his conviction that he was exactly the right person for this delicate and difficult task... His skill and aptitude in pastoral work are exceptional." *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 650.

latter's literature. "Tillich has attempted to uncover a direct relation between (the spirit and the masses); he sees the holiness of the formless mass in that it can be given form by the revelation of the forming absolute. But this no longer has anything to do with Christian theology."⁷ This is Bonhoeffer's first documented appraisal of Paul Tillich's theology. While commending Tillich for his challenge to the church to be engaged with society's cry for community, throughout his writing Bonhoeffer separates himself from Tillich's imposition of philosophical construction upon Christian theology.

Another substantive distancing from Tillich occurs in *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer's *Habilitationsschrift* (1930). This second dissertation focuses upon revelation contrasted with Heidegger's idealism. "If Paul Tillich believes that there is no possibility of distinguishing between philosophical and theological anthropology, one need only refer to the concept of revelation" (Bonhoeffer 1996, 77). Like Fiddes, Bonhoeffer focuses upon revelation as the unique difference between doing philosophy vs. theology. Bonhoeffer continually points out the difference between philosophical and theological discourse. Believers can state no more accurately or completely than unbelievers what revelation is. What more do believers know? Just this, that revelation has touched them.

As Marsh has said, it is Bonhoeffer's Christology that accounts for his ideological distance from Tillich in particular and philosophical theology in general. The following words from the Preface to *Christ the Center*, a book of Bonhoeffer's 1933 Berlin Christology lectures, offer a context within which one may analyze his method and anticipate how he uses *participation* explicitly in his prison correspondence eleven years later. Robertson reveals a distancing of Bonhoeffer from liberal theology's removal of Reformation teaching from Protestant thought; note his comments on Tillich's religious interpretation of the world.

Bonhoeffer was a true disciple of Harnack in his appreciation of the strength of liberal theology. Yet he saw that it failed—in the dispute between Christ and the world it eventually accepted the comparatively clement peace dictated by the world. But at least liberal theology saw that the battle had to be fought, even if it were lost to the superior forces of the world. The Church reacted with a return to the Bible and the Reformers. Bonhoeffer shows the inadequacy of many of his contemporaries in their attempts to deal with the world come of age.... Tillich attempted to interpret the evolution of the world in a religious sense: the world unseated him and went on by itself: he too sought to understand the world better than it understood itself, but it felt entirely misunderstood and rejected the imputation. All these, says Bonhoeffer, were "sailing in the sea of liberal theology" (1978, 14).

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, ed. C. Green, trans. Joachim v. Soosten, DBWE 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 239. This is Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation written in 1927 published first in Germany in 1930 and first in English in 1963. In 1986 a new critical edition was published in Germany as the first volume of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*. A new English translation of Bonhoeffer is underway known as *DBWE* of which *Sanctorum Communio* is the first volume.

With the above as background, we now investigate Bonhoeffer's use of *participation* from revelation given a crucified God within *theologia crucis*. In the Prologue, "After Ten Years," to what became the well-known book *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected upon his struggle to live in the Third Reich under Hitler. He spoke of large-heartedness and the sufferings of others within the context of sympathy. "Christ, so the scriptures tell us, bore the sufferings of humanity in his own body as if they were his own—a thought beyond our comprehension...we are not Christ...we are not called to redeem the world...but if we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ's large-heartedness...the redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer" (1997, 13–14).

In this statement, Bonhoeffer summarizes his use of *Stellvertretung* [vicarious representative atonement], the common thread in the tapestry of his literature forming a continuity from his student to his prison years. It is a statement about the church in partnership with Jesus Christ in the redemptive task of and for the world. It is statement about the church which has meaning based upon the necessity and sufficiency of the soteriological work of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners needing God's grace to be reconciled. He is speaking of participation implicitly here. Written on New Year's Day, 1943, these words introduce letters which use *participation* to contextualize the above analysis of biblical text in his situation for the last two years of his life.

In a letter to Renate and Eberhard Bethge in May 1944 celebrating the baptism of their son, he links church theology words within a theology of culture. "Reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship...our church is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation to the world...Christian speaking must be born anew...from prayer and righteous action...It will be a new language, quite nonreligious, but liberating and redeeming—as was Jesus' language" (1998, 300). In these words, the traditionally misinterpreted notion of a Christianity without a personal suffering God causally involved in the world emerged from those theologians who first introduced Dietrich Bonhoeffer to a North American audience. To them, Bonhoeffer's idea of a crucified God meant the death of a personal God. Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross was distorted to serve the needs of the so-called death of God theologians of the 1960s.

Fueled by a Tillichian methodology, it is easy to see how this might have happened. Given Dietrich Bonhoeffer's christology—an inversion of Tillich's correlation methodology—with special reference to his use of *Stellvertretung*, we find a corrective to Tillich's Being-itself in Marsh's precise analysis discussed above. Bonhoeffer's use of *participation* meets the intent of Tillich's theology of culture requiring a new language at no cost to historic Christianity. Tillich's "God" who is necessary as an answer to philosophy's questions is replaced by the personal God who is "more than necessary"⁸ (Juengel 1983, 310).

⁸Eberhard Juengel speaks of Bonhoeffer's return of the "death of God" to theology from previous philosophical speculative discussion as a gracious God who is "more than necessary" and beyond the answers to questions human

As in the prologue, this baptismal letter employs the new language of proving ourselves worthy to survive by identifying ourselves generously and unselfishly with the life of the community and with the sufferings of other persons. Note the nonreligious language which anticipates his later explicit use of *participation*. These words are written to people who are living under the attack of Allied bombing, without running water, electricity, looking for food and forced from their homes—“survival” is a key word. Bonhoeffer spoke “from below” with culturally-sensitive words of ultimate concern to his audience within a context of faith.

Participation is explicitly introduced into Bonhoeffer’s prison correspondence in his July 18, 1944 letter to Bethge where his deepest and most misunderstood thoughts occur. He speaks of the secular life, not in exiling the personal God to the isle of philosophical abstraction, but by sharing in God’s sufferings. Continuing his nonreligious theme, without putting a crucified God *behind* the cross but allowing him to remain *on* the cross for sinners, he speaks of being human as Christians. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. When Bonhoeffer uses “secular” he isn’t trading off transcendence for immanence in a way that denies the Incarnation. That Harvey Cox in his “To Speak in a Secular Fashion of God,” failed to mention “powerlessness” and spoke only of “man’s political participation” (1990, 211) is one example of how the *theological* impact of Bonhoeffer’s thoughts is often missed when his words seem usable for other agendae.

Participation is used later in this same letter together with *powerlessness*. In a random list of people and events mentioned in the New Testament, Bonhoeffer speaks nonreligiously about persons of faith. The only thing that is common to all these is their sharing in the suffering of God in Christ involving the whole of one’s life. But what does this life look like, this participation in the powerlessness of God in the world? Here we find vintage Bonhoeffer speaking of a personal crucified God as the criterion of Christian theology—not the omnipotent, impassible God from classic theism. Moltmann’s question, “What does the human cross of Christ mean for God?” (1993, x) is anticipated and answered here: “powerlessness.” That is, the “more than necessary” freely assumed “powerlessness” of God for sinners on a cross is the powerful way Christ conquers sin as *Stellvertreter* [vicarious representative]. Any notion of an impassible God from Greek philosophy vanishes in this theological construction by Bonhoeffer in his prison letters. When properly interpreted, as in Moltmann, we find, not the death of a personal God no longer causal in the world, but the crucified God becoming “powerless” on earth to redeem sinners.

On the day after the failed bombing of Hitler’s conference room, July 21, 1944 Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge of his emerging thoughts of nonreligious Christianity and

beings may or may not have. Here, with Bonhoeffer’s notion of *deus ex machina*, God’s essence and existence are not reduced to mere answers to questions. Should humanity be able to answer its own questions, where would that leave the necessity of God? God’s redemptive agenda for the universe is “more than necessary” giving the world more meaning and significance still.

participation in the powerlessness of God. He spoke of the this-worldliness of Christianity. He wrote about once feeling that to have faith meant trying to live a holy life. With no removal of Luther's personal crucified God as redeemer of humanity, Bonhoeffer in this letter now equates having faith with living completely in this world. In the nonreligious language of a theology of culture which retains a personal biblical God of pathos, he defined "this-worldliness" as "living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities" (1998, 369). Once again he comes back to the above idea of *participation*, implicitly. "We throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with God in Gethsemane...we share in God's sufferings through a life of this kind" (370).

Part of the papers found from Bonhoeffer's prison time includes an outline for a book of 100 pages with a second chapter entitled, "The Real Meaning of Christian Faith." From this sketchy series of notes, we locate the final explicit uses of *participation* in the literature of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross and resurrection). The "being" he discusses is defined by a Jesus who is for others. His comments fall within his earlier thoughts on nonreligious Christianity. Here again, Bonhoeffer says, "Our relation to God is not a 'religious' relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable—that is not authentic transcendence—but our relation to God is a new life in 'existence for others,' through participation in the being of Jesus—the 'man for others,'—and therefore the Crucified, the man who lives out of the transcendent" (381–82). Bonhoeffer's notion of God's powerlessness and weakness in Jesus' being for others is often misunderstood.

God, while suffering, is not helpless and inactive in the world. Dorothy Soelle's conclusion that secular theology is based upon the helplessness of God in the world is cleared up by Bonhoeffer's definition of power—one that differs from both worldly and often theological usages.... "the God of the Bible wins power and space in the world by his weakness" (361). The idea of strength through weakness and powerlessness is uniquely Christian and therefore foreign to the world. It also counters Nietzsche's notions of will to power. "A weak God challenges his (Nietzsche's) human value of the will to power" (Fiddes 2000, 181). To summarize Dietrich Bonhoeffer's method and use of *participation* is to speak of his robust christology from revelation and the crucified God of Luther's return to *theologia crucis*. With Bonhoeffer we locate a new language which speaks to the postmodern, nonreligious person without trading off a personal God whose love for humanity allows him the freedom to become powerless and to be pushed out to the margins on a scandalous cross for sinners. While retentive of the Gospel from revelation, Bonhoeffer introduces new language to communicate a transcendent-immanent crucified God in Christ in non-Nietzschean weakness and powerlessness by becoming sin to restore persons in their relationship to the Creator-Redeemer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's innovative nonreligious language in general and his use of *participation* in particular speak to a world come of age without cost to Christian theology.

Conclusion

This essay has focused upon how *participation* may be viewed theologically as constructed upon a crucified God in relationship with a suffering cruciform community for others in the world—the church. We’ve observed the differences of an abstract philosophy of glory compared with the concreteness inherent from a theology of the cross represented by Tillich and Bonhoeffer, respectively. Both Lutheran thinkers wrestled with how to answer existential questions theologically for the nonreligious hearer. This article has asserted that a only crucified God who suffers with and for human beings reconnects the dialogue of expectation and experience. We’ve concluded that concrete praxis is unavailable from an abstraction of God as Being-itself. The passibility of a suffering God from the people of Israel is radically present as *Deus absconditus* from a *theologia crucis* contra the officially optimistic triumphant God behind North American cultural Christianity. We’ve seen that Tillich’s method, at best, only makes the human encounter with non-being tolerable. Bonhoeffer’s method offers a *Stellvertreter*, who as weak and powerless, conquers non-being by bearing it on behalf of humanity, and in so doing powerfully conquers sin for sinners. Tillich’s impassible Being-itself cannot freely choose to suffer on behalf of humanity and is destined to ‘overcome’ a negative life force within himself, but not for others. Tillich’s articulation of an abstract “God” cloaked in abstruse language fails to link *theologia crucis* with 20th century meaninglessness. Bonhoeffer’s crucified God suffers with a 14 year old boy dying slowly on an Auschwitz gallows (Wiesel).

Theology is participation in the life of God infleshed in a cruciform community of forgiven sinners called the church. It was a *crucified* God whose resurrection transformed a frightened band of men who fled the cross while women stayed to participate in Jesus’ suffering. It took an existential encounter with Jesus’ wounded body before Thomas abandoned disbelief to embrace faith. If the blood of the martyrs really is the seed of the church, possibly Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s compelling theological anthropology of *participation* opens space for concrete ecclesial praxis. Given its participation in the life of God, the church may yet recover from its philosophically-induced malaise learned during the 20th century. Such recovery may take shape in its speaking concretely to a culture exhausted by modernity’s unkept promises of optimism evolved from a naturally selected enlightenment unfit to survive reality.

In sum, an indigenous theology of the cross incarnated by an empirically visible community of sinners spiritually related to a crucified God offers hope to today’s North American disillusioned with a failed dream. But it is only in the scandal of the cross that the “already-not yet” dialectic of a faith that is Christian symbolizes the way things are in today’s terror-stricken global village. Only a *failed* God on a Roman tool of torture raised from the dead can help us determine the meaning of our own failure. Co-partnership with a crucified God takes shape in ecclesial praxis for others where theology is returned to a church which loves both Creation and its creatures no less than its God.

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