

Beyond Religion: A Bonhoefferian Discussion of Ecclesial Repentance in the Aftermath of Abuse

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sce**Christopher Whyte** 

University of St. Andrews, UK

Abstract

Abuse, when committed by spiritual authority figures, can have far-reaching consequences for church communities well after perpetrators have been removed and held accountable. In attending to survivors, a host of issues may come to light, including but not limited to, organizational complicity in abuse, institutional marginalization of the vulnerable, and the revelation that worship spaces can be traumatically triggering. The work of scholars like Michelle Panchuk, Elaine Heath, and Katharina von Kellenbach all point to the challenging reality that ecclesial repentance may demand dramatic changes to restore a safe environment and righteous expressions of worship that honour God's intentions for all. Glen Kinoshita's 'ministry of reconciliation' and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 'preparing the way' and 'religionless Christianity' are texts that on the surface address this type of process; however, it is not clear that either scholar fully reckons with the issue of a worshipping community or space that has been so marred by abuse as to become an impediment to a survivor's participation in liturgy. In this article, I modify Bonhoeffer's work to move beyond his claims and make recommendations for further steps towards repentance.

Keywords

Christian ethics, spiritual abuse, ecclesial repentance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Michelle Panchuk, Elaine Heath, Katharina von Kellenbach, Glen Kinoshita

Introduction

In this article, I consider postures of repentance that churches might take up in the aftermath of abuse committed by spiritual authority figures from their congregations. By repentance, I mean the reformation of thought and practice unto positive changes away

Corresponding author:

Christopher Whyte, School of Divinity, University of St. Andrews, St. Mary's College, South Street, St Andrews, KY16 9AJ, UK.

Email: cw274@st-andrews.ac.uk

from the accommodation or facilitation of abuse. I am specifically concerned with the forms of physical or sexual abuse that, when committed by ecclesial authorities, impede or incapacitate the worship of survivors or cause worship environments to become triggering for the same. While a robust discussion of care for survivors is a topic deserving of its own careful treatment, that is beyond the scope of this article. Also, I will not address the specific responses necessary to hold perpetrators of abuse accountable, another topic deserving of thorough engagement. For this discussion, I will focus on initial steps that might be taken towards the repair of spaces and practices marred by abusive leaders. These steps are presented with communities in mind who are able to 1) recognize their own culpability in harm and 2) have the institutional flexibility to enact structural change.

By culpability, I mean a host of entanglements with wrongs that can include, but are not limited to, accommodating or licensing the behaviour of an abusive leader, insulating said leader from accountability, and/or contributing to an institutional culture in which those vulnerable to abuse are underserved or dismissed. As a former pastor in an independent, Charismatic Protestant congregation, I expect that my recommendations are best suited to those types of institutions but I am open to the possibility that there may be applications for other types of denominational settings. I also recognize that issues of polity may preclude application. With these caveats in mind, I will attempt to discuss how churches within the boundaries established can begin to repent of their entanglements with corrupt power. I will consider theological scholarship that engages the needs of survivors, the early church's response to culpability in harms, and the ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a white, cisgendered, heterosexual male, I recognize the limits of my positionality and thus my attempt is not to overprescribe, but instead discuss recommendations for repentance that have benefited my own efforts to disentangle from power structures marginalizing the vulnerable.¹

I also want to specifically recognize that, at first glance, Bonhoeffer can seem a poor choice for this discussion. Lisa Dahill has compellingly argued that Bonhoeffer's work is not appropriate for unnuanced application by certain vulnerable groups, and she specifically mentions survivors amongst those who should not apply Bonhoeffer's corpus at face value.² However, Dahill also notes that Bonhoeffer is an example of an individual repenting of corrupt power and seeking spiritual formation through abdication of dominance.³ It is this tension that I propose can be helpful to the concerns of this article. Bonhoeffer is an individual who in many ways exemplifies the kind of repentance I have in mind *and* yet the central claims of his corpus are not necessarily suited to the best interests of survivors. Therefore, his work can help to illumine the distinctions

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1. I am grateful for the opportunity to have first presented this paper at the SSCE annual meeting. Thanks are owed to Sarah Shin, Harvey Cawdron, Oliver Crisp, Andy Everhart, Tessa Hayashida, Dani Jansen, David Stuart, and Andrew Torrance for their feedback on drafts of this article. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers who provided helpful comments. All errors in this article are mine alone.
 2. Lisa Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009), pp. 227–28.
 3. Dahill, *Reading from the Underside*, pp. 108–09.

between repentance abandoning certain wrong behaviours and more robust repentance that rightly recognizes and attends to those wronged.

This kind of robust repentance is no small task for any one church to take up. As will be shown shortly, survivors of spiritual abuse may not be able to enter religious spaces due to the lingering effects of trauma that persist after offenders have been removed and held accountable. In such instances, liturgical spaces, or even representatives of the removed spiritual authority, become impediments to the participation of survivors. As such, righteous action in the aftermath of abuse demands consideration of the multi-faceted damage that abuse causes and the variegated issues that accommodated that abuse. Too great an emphasis on the church-community being the appropriate agent to care for the survivor without sufficient attention to robust repair might only trigger the abused and unknowingly oppose Christ's intentions.

Both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Glen Kinoshita discuss considerations that seem, on the surface, instructive for the repair I have in mind. Bonhoeffer discusses 'preparing the way', concrete interventions in material conditions to facilitate encounters with Christ.⁴ In this article, I will argue that 'preparing the way' can serve to illuminate the central importance of caring for those suffering from liturgical incapacitation arising from abuse. Kinoshita's analysis of the book of Acts identifies disparities analogous to those that arise in the wake of abuse. His research assesses specific impediments to flourishing experienced in the context of the first century CE⁵ and thus provides historical examples of the consequences of disparity that further strengthen Bonhoeffer's argument.

Despite the helpful way in which these accounts of repentance consider matters of power and privilege, more must be said about how churches can reckon with and seek repair of their own corruptions. Therefore, I will first consider the scholarship of Michelle Panchuk, Elaine Heath, and Katherina von Kellenbach to better establish my claim that churches should take up ecclesial repentance towards the repair of corrupted spaces of worship. I will then analyse Bonhoeffer's 'preparing the way' in dialogue with Kinoshita to highlight the strengths and limitations of those accounts. Finally, I will consider how Bonhoeffer's own account of religionless Christianity may imply a path forward for those churches who seek to fully disentangle from legacies of abuse. I am not, in this article, claiming that Bonhoeffer is the best or only way forward for ecclesial repair. Instead, I will make the more modest claim that Bonhoeffer's own wrestle with the problem of a world that no longer needs the church, can inform the difficult task of navigating the aftermath of traumatic, spiritual abuse.

When the Church Impedes Christ

Michelle Panchuk articulates the painful reality that in cases when spiritual authority figures commit harm, say through sexual abuse, survivors of that abuse might find

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 161–65.

5. Glen Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts as a Case Study: Examining the Ministry of Reconciliation', *Justice, Spirituality, and Education* 3.1 (2015), pp. 73–90, esp. pp. 76–78.

themselves unable to enter into religious spaces due to the onslaught of traumatic memories. Worse yet, she argues they can interpret the abuse as a sign of God's rejection or believe that God endorsed the horrors suffered by virtue of the fact that the abuser was ostensibly God's agent.⁶ Panchuk then claims that when such outcomes make attending to worship a persistently traumatic encounter, then ceasing to participate in the elements of worship is a justified course of action. More specifically, she argues victims might not be obligated to worship God in such a case and thus might be justified in deconverting, meaning they cease to participate in the elements of 'religious worship'.⁷ Panchuk is clear that such an outcome is at the extreme end of a spectrum between maintaining normative forms of worship and complete avoidance, but that the spectrum is helpful for thinking of the various ways that survivors might be nonculpable for various incapacities to participate in worship.⁸ As those incapacities are not monolithic, she argues that between typical participation in worship and deconversion, survivors might pursue 'non-conventional spirituality' through 'radical institutional change' or by seeking out 'new structures for spirituality'.⁹

Elaine Heath draws similar conclusions as she considers the impact of reading the Bible with survivors. She argues that reconciliation in the wake of abuse should be a long, careful, patient process. Sadly, too many ecclesial processes prioritize quick forgiveness for the offender and communicate to survivors that they must immediately incorporate perpetrators back into their lives or risk God's condemnation.¹⁰ Reconciliation, Heath argues, should instead prioritize vindication for survivors and justice for offenders. Such a process continually invites God's justice into the work of reconciliation while recognizing the process may not be fully accomplished prior to the eschaton.¹¹ Thus, Heath highlights that reconciliation may require longstanding accommodations, especially considering how memories of abuse may impede physical participation in triggering elements of worship. Heath maintains that liturgical flexibility is necessary to welcome those suffering under the intensity of body memories from assault. Those traumatic associations can cause the inherent physicality of rituals like the eucharist to be triggering.¹²

Finally, Katherina von Kellenbach, who has conducted extensive research into the church's engagement with Nazi criminals in the aftermath of World War II, argues that historically the church has consistently 'undercut the prerogative of the victim' in rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation. She argues this not only fails victims but also offenders as such a process fails to recognize that the capacity for horrific abuse indicates the perpetrator is morally compromised on a level requiring extensive moral

6. Michelle Panchuk, 'The Shattered Spiritual Self: A Philosophical Exploration of Religious Trauma', *Res Philosophical* 95.3 (2018), pp. 505–530, esp. pp. 514–15.

7. Panchuk, 'The Shattered Spiritual Self', pp. 520–22.

8. Panchuk, 'The Shattered Spiritual Self', pp. 521–27.

9. Panchuk, 'The Shattered Spiritual Self', p. 525.

10. Elaine Heath, *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), pp. 156–57.

11. Heath, *We Were the Least of These*, p. 157.

12. Heath, *We Were the Least of These*, p. 145.

transformation prior to reconciliation.¹³ Recognition of guilt, on the part of the abuser, is a necessary step on the path to authentic reconciliation between offender and offended.¹⁴

Panchuk, Heath, and von Kellenbach, taken together, indicate that working to restore safe participation in liturgy for survivors is not a straightforward or easy task. Panchuk argues abuse can incapacitate a survivor's capacity to worship when: 1) the abuser is someone connected to the religious paradigm of the survivor, 2) this causes the survivor to believe that religion played some role in the abuse occurring, and 3) the post-traumatic outcomes can be triggered by exposure to religious objects, practices, or persons. This means that a wide range of conditions can result in liturgical incapacitation.¹⁵ Beyond this, Heath's aforementioned emphasis on the inherent physicality of certain elements of worship indicates these practices can be triggering even if the abuser was not a spiritual authority. Thus, abuse might severely impede the survivor's participation in physical experiences in ways that make religious practice triggering by association. Or, even when liturgical spaces, symbols, or connected persons do not trigger the survivor, the historic failures von Kellenbach and Heath mention might lead survivors to conclude they would be best served to avoid churches.

The last two concerns are particularly significant when one considers the frequency with which abuse is committed. Rape Crisis reports that in 2022, one in four women in England and Wales reported that they had experienced sexual assault as adults.¹⁶ It is not only possible, but likely, that survivors are members of most congregations and are among those considering church attendance. The fundamental disparity in the experience of worship between survivors and those members who have not experienced abuse is likely present to some degree in most church communities.

The Ministry of Reconciliation in the Book of Acts

The challenge of ubiquitous disparity is not something new to the church. Glen Kinoshita surveys the early church's engagement with analogous issues. Kinoshita uses the term 'ministry of reconciliation' to describe the early church's efforts, as depicted in Acts, to overcome social fractures imposed by the powerful. In the first century CE, an entrenched, privileged few oppressively segregated the masses along lines of ethnicity, culture, and religion.¹⁷ Social divisive hierarchies were normative.¹⁸ Even the newly inaugurated church was not immune to this ordering of society. As an example, Kinoshita connects the failure to feed Hellenistic widows in Acts 6 to the unconscious acceptance of ethnic and religious power imbalances.¹⁹ He cites indignant reactions to

13. Katharina von Kellenbach, *Mark of Cain: Guilt and Denial in the Post-War Lives of Nazi Perpetrators* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 197.

14. Von Kellenbach, *Mark of Cain*, pp. 188–89.

15. Panchuk, 'The Shattered Spiritual Self', pp. 520–22.

16. Anonymous, 'Rape and Sexual Assault Statistics', *Rape Crisis England and Wales*, <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/statistics-sexual-violence/>.

17. Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts', pp. 76–77.

18. Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts', pp. 76–77.

19. Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts', p. 81.

Philip's ministry in Samaria in Acts 8 and Peter's visit to Cornelius in Acts 10 as evidence of unconscious ethnic biases.²⁰ Christ's call to unity in the body exposed the church's unknowing entanglement with categories imposed by the dominant.

Here it is important to explain the connection between the types of disparities described in the book of Acts and those that arise as the result of abuse. One might consider these as outcomes of fundamentally different kinds. However, what connects them is the breakdown of integrity and the consequent responsibilities of church institutions entangled in wrongs. In examining Acts, Kinoshita argues that conscious or unconscious alignment with oppressive entities and systems contributed to church environments in which injustices went unchecked. When Kinoshita mentions the Hellenistic widows, he asserts that it was the unacknowledged adoption of cultural norms that hid and perpetuated the disparate treatment of the vulnerable.²¹ This implies an inherent tension between the unconscious attitudes and the conscious beliefs of the early church. Bearing this example in mind, it is not difficult to imagine how Christians immersed in a culture in which abuse is prevalent, yet victims are dismissed, the needs of perpetrators are prioritized, and justice is not sufficiently attended to might unknowingly contribute to liturgical paradigms in which abuses are hidden and survivors' needs are unmet.

Just as Hellenistic widows were likely overlooked due to unconscious alignment with a cultural paradigm that imposed disparity, survivors' needs might be overlooked in churches that unconsciously align with cultural tendencies to favour abusers and gaslight, dismiss, or fail to attend to survivors. This is the most charitable possibility. It is not unlikely that some church structures might consciously align with the corrupting tendencies I have identified. Regardless of the circumstances, just as the apostles reckoned with an unforeseen, yet still unacceptable disparity—widows being denied food—the church today has a responsibility to confront any corruption that causes the church to overlook survivors and must attend to the disparities that arise in the wake of abuse. As has been discussed, there is simply too much evidence that this is a prevalent rather than a liminal reality. This responsibility remains whether or not churches are aware of survivors in their communities. Even in a case when there were no survivors or abusers in a church community—which seems statistically unlikely—churches would still have good reason to search out any unintentional corruption of unconscious attitudes or conscious beliefs that might result in harm to survivors later joining that fellowship.

Returning to the context of the book of Acts, Kinoshita maintains that as the early church grew in diversity, the ministry of reconciliation became increasingly necessary to unify peoples separated by oppressive actors and structures.²² He argues the Lukan account takes pains to depict this ministry of reconciliation working hand-in-hand with the proclamation of the gospel.²³ However, Kinoshita also observes an element of Christ's, and the early church's, ministry that could blur the boundaries between gospel and reconciliation. That element, specifically, is table fellowship.

20. Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts', p. 82.

21. Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts', p. 81.

22. Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts', pp. 83–87.

23. Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts', p. 88.

Kinoshita notes that the sharing of meals carried culturally specific non-verbal communication in the first century. Christ's expansive invitation to dine at his table communicated 'inclusiveness in the Kingdom of God' and that 'the gospel is for all people'.²⁴ Peter's willingness to eat with Gentiles was met with contempt because it communicated 'acceptance and close identification'.²⁵ So, Kinoshita implies a *caveat*. If sharing food at Jesus' table nonverbally communicates inclusion, then invitation can be understood as both an implicit proclamation of the gospel and indicative that, in Christ, God has already incorporated those that society has marginalized. Christ includes those that the church has knowingly or unknowingly excluded.

By creating a seemingly secular space for Kingdom inclusion, Christ accepts those who are unwelcome in ecclesial spaces. His example of an inclusive fellowship around himself is an implicit indictment of the tendency to exclude some from worship. Therefore, Kinoshita's own account implies the possibility of adapting the ministry of reconciliation to not only consider social divisions, but disparate experiences in liturgical spaces arising as a consequence of abuse. Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues for something akin to this ministry of reconciliation with similar implications.

'Preparing the Way'

In response to the horrors of the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer reflects on the sins and failures of the church at a time when it was most needed. In doing so, he confesses his own complicity in the evils he has witnessed. He writes:

Even the most secret sin of the individual soils and destroys the body of Christ ... I cannot pacify myself by saying that my part in all this is slight and hardly noticeable. There is no calculating here ... I am guilty of inordinate desire; I am guilty of cowardly silence when I should have spoken; I am guilty of untruthfulness and hypocrisy in the face of threatening violence; I am guilty of disowning without mercy the poorest of my neighbors. I am guilty of disloyalty and falling away from Christ.²⁶

Bonhoeffer goes on to confess on behalf of the German church for its sin and failures: a failure to confront those who invoke Jesus while committing evil, weak preaching, barren worship, disrespect for parents, a failure to help victims, complicity in the breakdown of sexual purity, silence in the face of exploitation, a failure to hold slanderers accountable, a coveting of power and comforts, and violations of Ten Commandments.²⁷ Elsewhere, when reflecting on the state of the German church in 'Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of D.W.R.', he laments that they have 'become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So ... we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings'.²⁸

24. Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts', p. 83.

25. Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts', p. 82.

26. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 136–37.

27. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 138–41.

28. Thanks are owed to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting these passages on guilt. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy; trans. Isabel Best, Lisa

While these are stirring admissions of guilt, that vulnerably grapple with matters of complicity and emphasize justice, they lack essential content necessary to this discussion. Bonhoeffer's reflections are primarily geared towards the offender, even in processes of healing. He maintains that the outcome of confession should be the forgiveness of guilt and is ambiguous or silent with regard to specific processes of justice or repair for the offended.²⁹ This is underscored when his confession on behalf of the church continues into a reflection on appropriate responses to offences committed by the state. Therein, he argues that when the state admits its guilt, 'the guilt is not justified, not removed, not forgiven. It remains, but the wound that it inflicted is scarred over. For the church and for individual believers there can only be a full break with guilt and a new beginning, through the gift of forgiveness of sin'.³⁰ While this statement is far from clear, the language of full break does seem to imply that when the church confesses wrongs, forgiveness received erases responsibility to repair past actions, as no guilt remains.

Bonhoeffer further argues that, with regard to the state, history cannot be rewound and that if the goods of state order outweigh the evils wrought by those in power, then those institutions should not rush to relinquish power even when gained by unjust means. Thus, he gives clear priority to what he perceives as the benefits of order over the demands for repair coming from those who have suffered injustices.³¹ Like his confessions for the German church, it is the responsibilities of the perpetrator he highlights, rather than the needs of the victims. In addressing both church and state, he emphasizes future just action must be taken up by the offending parties and is ambiguous or silent on meaningful repair for the offended.

Thus, Bonhoeffer's discussions of guilt contain examples of meaningful acknowledgement of wrongs committed which can inspire similar confessions, but they do not provide sufficient guidance for concrete responses to the outcomes of injustice. Further, the strong implication that repair is unnecessary so long as the offenders behave justly in the future leaves room for the conclusion that he is a proponent of the types of Christian reconciliation process that von Kellenbach and Heath argue do not rightly attend to victims. I am not making the strong claim that Bonhoeffer agrees with those paradigms, but the far weaker claim that his discussions of guilt, on the surface, do not sufficiently attend to the needs of the offended in cases of injustice. That said, elsewhere in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer does discuss what it would mean to attend to certain disparities. It is these passages that may be more informative for the purposes of this article.

In 'Ultimate and Penultimate Things', he argues that 'when ... a human life is deprived of the conditions that are part of being human ... justification of such a life by grace and faith is at least seriously hindered, if not made impossible'.³² Bonhoeffer is adamant that the church must attend to such deprivations. He argues:

E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 389.

29. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 142.

30. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 142–43.

31. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 143–44.

32. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 160.

We break bread with the hungry and share our home with them for the sake of Christ's love, which belongs to the hungry as much as it does to us. If the hungry do not come to faith, the guilt falls on those who denied them bread. To bring bread to the hungry is preparing the way for the coming of grace. What happens here is something penultimate. To give the hungry bread is not yet to proclaim them the grace of God and justification, and to have received bread does not yet mean to stand in faith.³³

So, Bonhoeffer both asserts the importance of alleviating the sufferings that make it difficult to encounter the love of Christ and draws a distinction between that service and the gospel. For Bonhoeffer, the gospel is the communication of God's free act on behalf of humanity in Christ.³⁴ Christ calls the church to serve those who have not yet received this gospel through the removal of gospel-obscuring impediments to flourishing.

While Bonhoeffer concedes overcoming disparities and the gospel work in partnership in a sense, for him they are explicitly not the same thing. The Lordship of Christ is always primary and addressing inequality must remain secondary. He contends:

Preparing the way for Christ cannot be simply a matter of creating certain desired and conducive conditions, such as creating a program of social reform ... everything depends on this action being a spiritual reality, since what is finally at stake is not the reform of worldly conditions but the coming of Christ ... It is Christ's way to us that must be prepared, not our way to Christ; and Christ's way can only be prepared in full awareness that it is precisely Christ who must prepare it ... Christ wills to overcome all obstacles, and can, even the greatest ...³⁵

So, Christ prepares the path to encounter with himself and also calls his body to join in that preparation. The focus here is not conditions but instead obedience. In Bonhoeffer's way of thinking, alleviating disparity is not important on its own terms but only in the sense that it aligns with Christ's pursuit of those not yet Christians. While this is distinct from Kinoshita's discussion of reconciliation as it operated within the early church, it is a reflection that takes seriously the impact of disparities on encounters with Christ.

Bonhoeffer holds that once individuals are baptized into the redeemed community, they join a communal expression that 'springs ever anew from the world of proclamation, and continues to find its goal and fulfillment in the Lord's supper'.³⁶ Each member, regardless of the biases, privileges, or deprivations known prior to conversion, is called to serve all other members.³⁷ At this point, the nature of service changes. Again, from Bonhoeffer, 'the exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from everyday Christian life in community ... may actually mean the exclusion of

33. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 163.

34. 'God's freedom has bound itself to us, that God's free grace becomes real for us alone ... because God in Christ is free for humankind'. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy; trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 63.

35. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 164-67.

36. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey; trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 233.

37. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, pp. 235-37.

Christ; for in the poor sister or brother, Christ is knocking at the door'.³⁸ The alleviation of suffering outside the body joins with Christ's pursuit of those who do not yet know him. The alleviation of suffering within the body recognizes that to serve a brother or sister is to serve Christ himself. While both Kinoshita and Bonhoeffer are primarily concerned with faithfulness to Christ's intentions when discussing responses to disparity, it is Bonhoeffer's account of interpersonal care within the body of Christ that is closest to Kinoshita's ministry of reconciliation. However, if one keeps in mind the caveat that Christ's table fellowship was a means to include those who had suffered unrighteous exclusion, it may be appropriate to say that while Bonhoeffer draws a distinction between the repair of disparities prior to and after conversion, that distinction is not so clear in accounts of the ministry of Jesus.

Reading Bonhoeffer and Kinoshita together underscores that the church must reckon with its own complicity. If the one who denies the hungry bread is guilty, this seems to imply that a community that misrepresents Christ by knowingly or unknowingly adopting corrupt, cultural systems of power and privilege is also at fault. Kinoshita's identification of the far-reaching impact of worldly oppression serves as a call to the church to consider whether it has blocked the way that Christ is preparing.

And yet, the book of Acts may also inform scepticism whether even a church committed to overcoming its unconscious entanglements can always identify when it is rightly participating in the preparing of the way. The apostles in Acts 6 do not seem aware of disparities marring the life of the church until it is brought to their attention by those suffering.³⁹ In the aftermath of abuse, unconscious entanglements might lead the church to believe that it has taken appropriate measures to remove obstacles, while failing to recognize the manner in which the liturgical space itself is an obstacle.

Therefore, the presuppositions defining Bonhoeffer and Kinoshita's work impede straightforward application to circumstances in which abuse, and the lasting traumatic memories of that abuse, make a particular liturgical space the impediment to worship. Panchuk's call to consider deconversion, Heath's identification of the potential for the physical elements to trigger, and von Kellenbach's identification of historic failures together undercut confidence that redeemed communities are always the appropriate agents of 'preparing the way' or of the 'ministry of reconciliation'.

Beyond this, unconscious entanglements will need to be identified if individual communities are to resist future abuse and reestablish ecclesial integrity. While there may not have been conscious participation, the church may have failed to check the power of a leader, might have accepted a culture in which abusive leaders are isolated from oversight, might have disregarded accusations of abusive conduct, or have failed to heed the concerns of those who would later suffer abuse. In each case, in such a church, even if it ultimately ensured that a leader was held accountable for specific offences, moral transformation of the community would still be necessary after the leader had

38. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together [and] Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly; trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 45–46.

39. Acts 6:1, NASB.

been removed. While one might claim these examples are liminal or rare—and I am increasingly convinced that neither is the case—they present an impasse worthy of careful consideration. So, how might a church participate in overcoming disparities, removing impediments within its liturgical spaces, and dealing with complicity in a manner sensitive to survivors? Bonhoeffer implies a modest step forward in his own anticipation of the future of Christianity.

Religionless Christianity

While it may seem odd to turn to Bonhoeffer here, especially after identifying shortcomings in his account, in late reflections he does consider the consequences of a world scarred by horrific harms. As Gustavo Gutiérrez puts it, in these later musings, Bonhoeffer begins to consider ‘the perspective of “those beneath”—those on the “underside of history”’.⁴⁰ In correspondence with Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer wrestles with the complexities of modern Christianity, writing:

The foundations are being pulled out from under all that ‘Christianity’ has previously been for us ... if we eventually must judge even the Western form of Christianity to be only a preliminary stage of a complete absence of religion, what kind of situation emerges for us, for the church? How can Christ become Lord of the religionless as well? Is there such as thing as a religionless Christian? If religion is only the garb in which Christianity is clothed—and this garb has looked very different in different ages—what then is religionless Christianity?⁴¹

Here, Bonhoeffer grapples with the possibility of Christianity shedding its trappings for something essential when faced with the world’s seeming abandonment of any need for religious practice. Bonhoeffer further argues that religion itself is, functionally, a false claim to power, a doomed to fail seeking of a ‘*deus ex machina*’ when human power fails.⁴² So religionless implies a space where societal dissatisfaction with failed appeals to religious power leads to an abandonment of traditional ecclesial structures.

It should be noted here that there is disagreement as to what Bonhoeffer meant in this letter. By some, Bonhoeffer was a harbinger of secularity.⁴³ Others have invoked religionless Christianity ‘as emblematic for postmodern philosophies that favour a hermeneutic view of truth, championing a non-metaphysical concept of God and Christianity’.⁴⁴ Eberhard Bethge insists that Bonhoeffer was not arguing for ‘the end of all piety, liturgy, prayer, and devotional life’, but instead was confronting a Western church that retreated

40. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 231.

41. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 363.

42. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 366.

43. Stephen R. Haynes, ‘Readings and Receptions’, in Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2019), pp. 473–85, esp. p. 474.

44. Jens Zimmerman, ‘Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Philosophy’, in Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2019), pp. 429–46, at p. 443.

from responsibility, failed to help disciples grow, and chose collusion with the state over a share in suffering.⁴⁵ Tom Greggs argues that Bonhoeffer mistakenly anticipated a secular age but correctly articulated a theological understanding of religionless Christianity.⁴⁶ In agreement with Bethge, Greggs concludes that Bonhoeffer's comments about religionless Christianity articulated that abandoning flawed, human religious expressions makes room for fixing eyes on God himself.⁴⁷ In this way, Bonhoeffer was considering how secularization might free Christians from postures that divert attention away from the truth of God.⁴⁸ According to this line of thinking, the corruptions that mar the church's witness must be distinguished from the primacy of God's own presence and action in Christ. Religion, so to speak, is a corruption of Christ's intentions for Christian worship. This can be confusing as Bonhoeffer, even when discussing religionless Christianity, still affirms what some might call religious elements. Still, what it does communicate is that a societal rejection of traditional forms of Christianity might make space for more righteous service to Christ as Lord.

I have only considered a small sampling of interpretations of Bonhoefferian religionlessness. However, Bethge's and Greggs' conclusions are suitable to the discussion at hand, as they attempt to hold in tension both Bonhoeffer's unflinching resolve regarding Christology and his malleable thoughts on secularity. As such, they are helpful for thinking about the types of spaces Christ might desire when traditional liturgical spaces become corrupted.

Holding broadly to Greggs' and Bethge's interpretations, those Christian communities reckoning with the fallout of horrific abuse might weigh the extent to which the liturgy and liturgical spaces have been corrupted as a result. They might seek to identify how far-reaching the corruption is, and attempt to follow Jesus as he prepares a new way for survivors. If a church discovers that the culture of its liturgical spaces, the manner of specific liturgical practices, or the institutional structures themselves are impediments Christ desires to remove, this might inspire new expressions of liturgy, modifications of the liturgical spaces, and changes in the thinking that formerly defined those elements. Such a process might free the community to pursue something more faithful to Christ, to attend to its own moral transformation, and to rightly attend to survivors.

Still, the necessary response cannot be easily prescribed. An individual church convinced it represents a persistent impediment to survivors' capacities to meet with Christ might weigh the possibilities of disbanding, offering 'non-conventionally religious spaces' free of trauma reminders, or appointing individuals to minister to survivors without any explicit reference to the church. This small set of possible examples evidences the breadth of possibilities for repentant communities. Considering how impactful these decisions might be, especially in the case of a decision to disband, churches might find the appropriate path daunting or even near impossible to navigate.

45. Eberhard Bethge, 'Bonhoeffer's Assertion of Religionless Christianity—Was He Mistaken?' in A.J. Klassen (ed.), *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 3–13, esp. pp. 9–10.

46. Tom Greggs, 'Religionless Christianity and the Political Implications of Theological Speech: What Bonhoeffer's Theology Yields to a World of Fundamentalisms', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11.3 (2009), pp. 293–308, esp. pp. 294–95.

47. Greggs, 'Religionless Christianity', p. 301.

48. Greggs, 'Religionless Christianity', pp. 304–305.

Postures for Discernment

This leaves one wondering how churches can determine how to proceed. The stakes for both survivors and repenting communities are high. A return to Kinoshita's survey of Acts can provide some guidance. He notes that in Acts 15 when some Jewish Christians demanded Gentile converts be circumcised, prayer led the Council at Jerusalem to affirm a new unity in the body of Christ of both Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised. Kinoshita argues that this move, birthed in prayer, confronted religious observance based on power rather than on Christ's leading.⁴⁹ In that light, the answer might be for a church to abandon any trappings of power within its worship. It would abdicate any claim to control the manner of liturgy and would seek to form new liturgical practices that prioritize space for survivors and repentance for those entangled with corrupt power.

Abandoning power would require an accurate recognition of the role of power in the particular church. Some communities might discover that they have fostered a culture of impunity in which leaders lack appropriate oversight. Others might discover that they have unknowingly created a context in which those who are abused lack appropriately safe avenues to report their experiences. Still, others might realize that they have fostered a community wherein certain types of individuals are particularly vulnerable to harm. The process of disciplining the leader might reveal that even when harm has been discovered, the power vested in leadership gives potential perpetrators more leverage, honour, and covering than victims. In each case, survivors would be an essential voice in discerning the next steps toward repair.

The process ahead will not be easy or simple when ecclesial discernment has been shown to be functionally shattered. Confronting corrupt power will likely expose spheres of inclusion for the powerful and exclusion for those denied that power. Also, if communities take seriously that the survivors might self-identify as remaining a member of their particular church even when refraining from worshipping, this implies the need for multiple paths for repair. There might well be separate processes for repairing the redeemed community who maintain their capacity to worship and attending to the incapacitated survivor's needs, which might potentially involve the needs and concerns of survivors' friends or relations. There is no guarantee that a survivor will choose to, or will be able to, continue to join in worship with even the most sensitive of communities. There may also be a process of waiting prior to discerning the appropriate path or paths forward. Repentance in this interim could include corporate lament for the wounds of the survivor and survivor's community, corporate intercession for the healing of the same, and/or a corporate decision to not make any decisions for next steps until the survivor can contribute to that discernment in some way. This discernment process would see the survivor's input as indispensable.⁵⁰

The conditions for ecclesial discernment I have sketched are daunting and to some individual churches might seem a bridge too far. One might argue that there is little

49. Kinoshita, 'The Book of Acts', pp. 84–85.

50. Here I have in mind 1 Cor. 12:22, NRSV.

confidence that communities desiring to see the redemption of their affiliations with abuse can see that end. Here, the Council at Jerusalem can offer another potential route forward. In Acts 15, Peter explicitly says that it is the Spirit who guides inclusion for Gentiles.⁵¹ Willie James Jennings describes the debate defining Acts 15 as ‘a mountain that must be climbed as they follow the Spirit ... Only when Peter recalled where the Spirit of God had led him ... did this group see the way forward’.⁵² So it is not only that the church reckoned with its adoption of power. It is also that the Spirit guided the church in the way of Christ. This shifted the paradigms and structures of those in Jerusalem. Again, from Jennings, the accommodations for Gentiles made ‘table-fellowship with Gentiles possible for Jews’.⁵³

Considering Kinoshita’s *caveat* regarding table-fellowship, the leading of the Spirit was not only a means to understand where Jesus was leading, but it was also the door through which a new place of inclusive joining was offered to those formerly separated. It ushered in new inclusive paradigms. Clinging to circumcision opposed Gentile inclusion, and perhaps unknowingly, the way that Jesus was preparing for the body. The leading of the Spirit revealed this error and a new vision of ecclesial community.

In light of all the challenges inherent to corporate discernment, communities would be wise to rely not on their strength but instead lean on the Spirit to guide them along Christ’s path. As they do, communities may require the outside input of professionals, advocacy groups, and counsellors who can serve to identify blind spots that impede that reliance on the Spirit. While an individual church might be repentant and willing to change, it is important to recognize that it may have been a former claim to the leading of the Spirit that became unknowingly corrupted by the allure of power. Whether the church conflated the charisma of an individual with spiritual gifting, or a Spirit-highlighted leader turned away from a righteous path toward abuse, at some point discernment in the community was broken. Trusted outside voices may be essential to restore right discernment of the Spirit. Graciously, the Spirit can work through those voices to restore, and reestablish, expressions of Christ’s inclusive kingdom within an individual community. It is only the Spirit who can reveal the specific path forward to rightly attend to and include survivors.

In Acts 6, the church appointed ‘seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and wisdom’ to meet the needs of Hellenistic widows,⁵⁴ a move amounting to inviting the Spirit to reorient existing patterns. In Acts 15, the church is led ‘to impose ... no further burden than ... essentials’,⁵⁵ a move that opens up, according to Jennings, a new intimate and inclusive communal reality.⁵⁶ One move hardly seems religionless, the other radically upsetting a religious paradigm. Still, that change did not displace Jewish Christians; rather it created a new radical space of joining between Jew and Gentile alike.⁵⁷

51. Acts 15:8-28, NRSVUE.

52. Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), p. 142.

53. Jennings, *Acts*, p. 143.

54. Acts 6:3, NRSVUE.

55. Acts 15:28, NRSVUE.

56. Jennings, *Acts*, pp. 143–44.

57. Jennings, *Acts*, pp. 142–44.

Whether the Spirit leads churches in a modification of existing structures or into the creation of new, expansive, and inclusive spaces for survivors, it is the Spirit who must illuminate the way Jesus makes for the abused. Holding too fast to the presumption that the church is always well positioned to 'prepare the way' might unknowingly impose the trappings of religious power rather than Christ's intended grace for survivors. With Panchuk in mind, Christ might meet a survivor in safe spaces found through deconversion rather than a traumatically triggering space of worship.

If a survivor has been abused by a spiritual figure, they have experienced religion of the worst kind. Except, in this case, rather than becoming disillusioned by the failure of some perceived *deus ex machina*, the survivor is abused by human authorities who have adopted corrupt systems of human power. To maintain spaces, unchanged, as cultivated by those leaders and expect survivors to enter them instead of asking what repair of those spaces Christ might guide is not obedience but arrogance. The way forward demands humility dictated not by liturgical norms but instead by God's care for victims and presence with them.⁵⁸

This indicates that it is not necessarily service from the church to the vulnerable, as Kinoshita and Bonhoeffer presume, that 'prepares the way'. More likely, it is a recognition of need for Christ's help in holding the complicit accountable, repairing that which has been corrupted, and caring for the wronged. This long road of repentance must rely on Christ's leading and care through the Spirit, even well outside the borders of liturgical spaces. This is not meant to delegitimize worship, though some might argue it goes farther than Bonhoeffer intends. Instead, it is an attempt to submit to the gracious Lord who, through the leading of the Spirit, can redeem even the most horrific corruptions of religious power but will do so on his own terms.

One final note: Jennings observes that, at the council at Jerusalem, Gentiles are silent in the formation of the recommendations for inclusion.⁵⁹ This must not be the case when communities attempt to repair the consequences and institutional causes of abuse. To discern the Spirit's leading together, the body needs those who have been met by Christ in the aftermath of their suffering and have been brought by Jesus to a place where they can safely share. A church that is not discerning to survivors might stay blind to the concessions to power that gave a leader a platform, or the licence, to commit abuse in the first place. In other words, it is not clear that a church that cannot hear survivors will actually be able to repent and take up a trajectory towards reconciliation with those communities and individuals who have been harmed. It might be only the survivors who can truly ascertain how the Spirit is leading. As Bonhoeffer emphasized, 'it is of incomparable value to see ... from the perspective of the ... maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled'.⁶⁰ With that in mind, I will close with a reflection by

58. And here again is something that Bonhoeffer wrestles with at the end of his life. 'Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help'. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 479–80.

59. Jennings, *Acts*, pp. 143–44.


60. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 52.

Elaine Heath on the consequences of abuse for participation in more physical aspects of worship. She writes:

Some of us survivors, especially if we experienced ritual abuse, may never be able to participate in the Eucharist regardless of its interpretation. If this is the case for us, be patient with our struggle ... We may or may not be able to tell you just why we cannot do this. If that is our reality, be kind. Put the wafer or bread into our hands. Let us control what we put into our mouths. Respect our boundaries.⁶¹

Heath makes viscerally clear what is far too easy to miss: that the Spirit's voice through survivors can uniquely and indispensably express Christ's way forward in the aftermath of abuse. Survivor testimony can illumine the scope of considerations that ecclesial repentance should take up. Through survivors, the Spirit can help the complicit to recognize their need for repair, to hear survivors, and to participate in Christ's own efforts to dismantle the systems of power that corrupt worship.

ORCID iD

Christopher Whyte  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2667-2283>

61. Heath, *We Were the Least of These*, p. 145.