**"From the Phraseological to the Real":
Lived Theology and the Mysteries of Practice**

Vanderbilt Conference on Faith and Practice

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It is a great honor to be with you tonight and to have been invited to give this opening address. I have learned so much about practical and pastoral theology from the work of Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra and the remarkable team of pastors and theological educators who produced this superb volume, *For Life Abundant*. It's exciting now to be part of these conversations; and I trust that my contributions tonight will enrich our work over our two days together.

For the past fifteen years, I have had the good fortune of writing, researching and teaching "lived theology", and it has been my privilege to carry out this mission in the company of many inspiring students, theologians, and practitioners.

I was once introduced as the director of the project on "livid" theology, and while that may be an apt description of some of my writing over the past several years, I don't think we are quite ready to make that change.

The Project on Lived Theology is housed in the department of religious studies at the University of Virginia, and it is part of a national reconsideration of the theological vocation focused on the methodological centrality of faith's redemptive practices in the world. Like the constitutive parts of the human or the ecclesial body, our work has a distinctive purpose and form. The Project is based on the rationale that the patterns and practices of Christian communities offer rich and generative material for theological

inquiry. For these patterns and practices are not just ways of "doing things", but they are also ways of "saying things" (as the historian Wayne Meeks has written in one of his essential studies of early Christian communities)"; practices and patterns are "communicative". What does it then mean to appropriate the lived experience of faith with the same care and precision with which we read and interpret texts? Might that task produce new models for partnerships between theologians and practitioners? These are some of the questions central to our work.

Many of our students bring with them an intense hunger for the opportunity to reconnect theology and life; and for this reason the theological turn to practice has, I think, found a welcome and dynamic culture in the academy and, alas, in the public university, where I teach. It is encouraging to see creative synergies working across fields and traditions with maximum attention to theological and hermeneutical methods grounded in worship, liturgy, preaching, teaching, the work of mercy and justice, and the quotidian goings-on of congregational life.

One of my first doctoral students was a young Brit named Peter Slade, who came to Virginia from the theology department at St. Andrews in Scotland, *by way of* the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Pete told me that when he described the mission of the project to his fellow graduate students, they would often light up and say, "That's why I decided to study theology in the first place!" In Pete Slade and many other fellow travelers, both at UVA and around the nation, we are seeing an emerging generation of theologians and scholars eager to embrace the whole of theological life—research, teaching and service--as a form of public

discipleship. This is a quite different scene from the theological academy in which I was educated during the theory-laden decade of the 1980's, and it is a shift worthy of celebration.

Pete's dissertation, "a theology of open friendship", which Oxford will publish in a few months, brings the lived experience of an ecumenical racial reconciliation initiative into conversation with academic theologies of reconciliation and friendship. And his research and teaching marries an interest in practical theology and documentary studies with historical and sociological studies of faith, race, and social justice in the American South. I think his work offers an example of a fresh way of writing practical theology, which is a subject we might wish to return to—the matter of practical theology as writing--sometime in the course of our conversations.

I would like to speak this evening on the theme, "From the Phraseological to the Real: Lived Theology and the Mysteries of Practice," and explore with you, while revisiting a chapter in the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a kind of practical theology that weaves together exuberant confessional convictions and dynamic, transformative practices in the totality of the theological life.

Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman remind us that the basic task of practical theology is to nurture and nourish "faithful discipleship". Ted Smith invites us in his essay to consider a way of writing and teaching shaped by "theological histories of practice".

Following their lead, I would like to share with you a theological narrative of practice; or more precisely of theological encounter and transformation, that shows how practices and disciplines not only nurture and nourish discipleship, teaching and writing, but are, as Craig Dykstra wrote in an earlier book, veritable “means of grace,” and thus “may be used by God to establish and sustain all people in the new life given in the Spirit”.

I cannot think of a more illuminative story of theological transformation and the birthing of the pastoral imagination than the account of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s visit to America in 1930-31. This is another way of saying that my contribution to our discussion is, I think, best rendered in storied-theology, so I invite you to join me for a while as we retrace the steps of what Friedrich von Weizaecker called Bonhoeffer’s “journey to reality.”

I

In the late summer of 1930, Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan as a visiting student and post-doctoral fellow supported by the German Academic Exchange Program. When he arrived he was a twenty-five year old lecturer at Berlin University. His doctoral dissertation, completed at the ripe old age of twenty-one, had been praised by the great Karl Barth as a “theological miracle”. The book had been published in Berlin by Trowitzsch and Son three days before he set sail for New York and would receive favorable reviews.

Bonhoeffer had also recently completed his second book, his habilitation thesis in systematic theology entitled *Act and Being*, which some of you know as a conceptually dazzling and youthfully ambitious exercise that attempts nothing less than a complete overhaul of the German philosophical tradition in view of the axiom "Christus als Gemeinde existieriend." A lack of self-confidence was not then, or ever, a problem for Bonhoeffer.

But when Bonhoeffer left New York ten months later, he departed with a new sense of vocation. The technical terminology that distinguished his writings and teaching until 1930 began to fade and a language more direct and expressive of lived Christian faith emerged in its place.

In Tegel prison in 1944, Bonhoeffer would recall the first American visit as one of the three decisive and transformative influences in his life. "I don't think I've ever changed very much," he wrote, "except perhaps at the time of my first impressions abroad and under the first conscious influence of father's personality. It was then that I turned from [the phraseological to the real]."

My friend, the historian David Nelson Duke, [say a word or two] in papers written before his untimely death in 2000 at the age of forty-nine, said that Bonhoeffer's school year in America cultivated in him "a new kind of moral passion".[1] It was much more than a period of gathering facts and broadening horizons in a different culture, though it was that too. It was a season of profound personal and spiritual growth sparked by a sober reckoning with the costs of being a Christian, a newfound

sense of the multi-dimensionality of life in Christ, and a more dynamic understanding of the theological vocation.

After his visit to America, Bonhoeffer began calling himself a Christian--rather than a theologian!--and to the dismay of many of colleagues and mentors, he began reading the Bible with practical and pastoral focus. His classes at Berlin University often spilled over from the lecture hall to the Bonhoeffer home in Grunewald where a group of young students met to pray, to read Scripture, to drink strong German coffee, to sing and enjoy music--Bach, romantic lieder and always Negro spirituals—and to brainstorm about new ways of pursuing the theological life. "The questions that Bonhoeffer now posed to his church, its theology, its ethics, and its attitude to Luther were new, an obvious departure from the purely academic sphere."[2] Bonhoeffer returned to Germany "with eyes wider open than before."[3] No longer was it possible "for the young theologian to separate his academic and pastoral activities from the commitment to his vocation."[4]

"Something had happened," Bonhoeffer's close friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, noted.

What happened?

I raise this question tonight not only out of interest in Bonhoeffer's biography, but, for the rich possibilities it holds for thinking about the reconfiguration of theology and practice in our time.

Let's start by taking a brief inventory of Bonhoeffer on the eve of his first American visit.

He came to New York restless and unsettled.

The theologian and scholar Clifford Green notes that while still serving as an assistant pastor in the German congregation in Barcelona in [1929], Bonhoeffer was searching for a pathway from the theological ideas he had embraced in his graduate studies to their social expression in lived experience.[5] On June 19, 1929, Bonhoeffer wrote to his former neighbor and teacher, Hermann Thumm, that "principles are quite good, but only until one is taught something better by the language of reality."[6]

His letters from Berlin in the fall of 1929, after his return from Barcelona to complete his second dissertation, reveal even a slight desperation. "The air is close in Germany, close and musty enough to suffocate you….Everything seems so infinitely banal and dull. I never before noticed what nonsense people speak in the trains, on the streets—shocking."[7]

What did he expect of the year in America?

We might draw out attention to an intriguing passage in Bonhoeffer's second theological examination at Berlin that offers a glimpse into his more intimate hopes for the year. (That may sound tedious but bear with me.) In an essay on "choosing texts for preaching", Bonhoeffer suggests that one promising theme for a sermon series is "God's path through history in the church of Christ."[8] The first text he mentions for such a series is Hebrews 12:1, "the verse that culminates the saga of faith from creation to

the first Christian martyrs in chapter eleven": "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" [Green].

The verse had particular importance for Bonhoeffer. He told a friend five months later, that as he experienced a new country, an unfamiliar theological culture, the churches of the New World, and a country still divided by race, he was searching for "a cloud of witnesses."

In the twelve courses Bonhoeffer took during his year as a Sloan Fellow, Bonhoeffer focused on philosophy of religion, theology, and ethics in an educational context and theological climate quite different from the sort to which he was accustomed in Berlin [Green, 21] As you probably have heard before, he was not impressed with the theology he encountered. His frequent complaints of the smorgasbord-like character of American theological education most often accompany accounts of his time in the United States; and his observations at the end of the year are no less critical than on that day in the fall of 1930 when he listened in dismay as his fellow students giggled over Luther's doctrine of the bondage of the will.

With so little at stake theologically, and absent the Barthian rediscovery of the revealing and righteous God of Jesus Christ, the American theological seminars, lectures and discussions, in Bonhoeffer's view, assumed a completely innocuous character".[9] "It has come to this," he complained "that the seminary has forgotten what Christian theology in its very essence stands for." "The principal doctrines of dogmatics are in utter disarray", he said. In America it would appear that it is possible to enter the ministry without having any idea what one believes.

Yet amidst all the hand-wringing, we should not lose sight of the important fact that Bonhoeffer had also complained about theology in Germany. He wrote from Berlin, "I'm supposed to be intellectually creative and grade excruciatingly dumb seminar papers!". More significant however than the vexing term papers and the claustrophobic trains, Bonhoeffer felt boxed in by institutional constraints and the lack of a vital connection between the classroom and the community. Indeed, I think the larger context of Bonhoeffer's agitated remarks suggests that Bonhoeffer had grown impatient with the enterprise of academic theology, whether it was being taught in New York or Berlin.

So what happened?

In *his two dissertations Bonhoeffer had sought to demonstrate the theological necessity of the self coming to itself in community.* He had written in *Sanctorum Communio* that, "The structural being-with-each-other [Miteinder] of church-community and its members, and the members acting-for-each-other [Fuereinander] as vicarious representatives in the power of the church-community, is what constitutes the specific sociological nature of the community of love [Liebesgemeinschaft]."[10]

But he had not experienced the embodiment of such theological affirmations in a community of hope and discipleship; and, more to the immediate point, *he had no way of thinking of theological education as anything other than the work done inside the academy for specialists.*

In America, the central themes in Bonhoeffer's theological thought came to life in unexpected ways. The transformation can be observed in three overlapping areas: in his critical encounter with American social theology, in his exposure to the American organizing tradition and in his participation in the African American church, all of which offered him theological friendships that crossed national, cultural and racial boundaries.

1. American Social Theology

In 1930, Union Theological Seminary in New York City was regarded as the bastion of progressive Protestant social thought in North America. The student body was more diverse than at any time in its hundred year history and included African Americans, Asian Americans, women and poor whites from the rural South. Union was the flagship seminary of the Protestant liberal establishment, *with a faculty of nearly forty, that included numerou*s influential public theologians--none more so than the indefatigable Reinhold Niebuhr, still only two years away from his pastorate in Detroit.

Bonhoeffer had never met anyone quite like Reinhold Niebuhr, the great "dramatist of theological ideas in the public arena" (in Larry Rasmussen's words), for whom probing analysis of the contemporary situation and existential engagement in its needs and conflicts were more important for theology than dogmatics and systematic work.

In the concept of "Christian realism", which Niebuhr was working out in the fall of 1930 and spring of 1931—and which would appear in its most developed form in his 1932 landmark book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*--Niebuhr intended to remind

modern believers, and all persons, believer or not, of their thick entanglement in the sinful structures of the world. No man or woman however sincere, well-meaning or pious could be afforded "final escape in historic existence from the contradictions in which human nature is involved." Christian realism meant charting a path between utopianism and resignation, trusting in the grace and forgiveness of God as we stumble through this world of ethical quandaries and complex political realities. Niebuhr's honest assessments of power and justice struck a chord with a generation searching for a way beyond liberal idealism and Victorian quietism to a more realistic and sober assessment of the contemporary situation.

Bonhoeffer took courses both semesters with Reinhold Niebuhr, his "Religion and Ethics" and his "Ethical Viewpoints in Modern Literature," in which he read deeply in contemporary African American literature. Though Bonhoeffer enjoyed the courses, he found Niebuhr's views bewildering. Roger Shinn recalls that one day after "the usual vigorous question period at the close of the class", Dietrich approached Reinhold and said indignantly, "Is this a theological school or a school for politicians?'" Bonhoeffer's notebooks are interesting in this light: after jotting down a few words from Niebuhr's lectures on religion and ethics—"Religion is the experience of the holy, transcendent experience of Goodness, Beauty, Truth and Holiness"—his pen grew still.[11]

But Niebuhr was equally perplexed by the young German, and he was bold in his criticisms of Bonhoeffer's theology. In response to a remark in a term paper that the "God of guidance" could be known only from the "God of justification", Niebuhr noted sharply that Bonhoeffer's doctrine of grace was too transcendent. Niebuhr pushed

Bonhoeffer to think more honestly about the ethical content and social significance of this "God of guidance". "In making grace as transcendent as you do," Niebuhr said, "I don't see how you can ascribe any ethical significance to it. Obedience to the will of God may be a religious experience, but it is not an ethical one until it issues in actions which can be socially valued."[12]

Niebuhr challenged Bonhoeffer on the the doctrine of justification and its meaning for Christians in the modern world. Justification must be embodied in responsible action and enacted in socially transformative patterns and practices? Otherwise, one would conclude, a doctrine of grace vanishes into metaphysical abstraction or "purely formal" doctrine. That kind of grace would be cheap grace.[13]

Still, Bonhoeffer never acknowledged an explicit theological debt to Niebuhr and he remained discontent with American Protestant thought throughout his year in New York. Nevertheless, I think it is correct to say that Bonhoeffer was moved and inspired by *the spirit of Niebuhr's theology*, in particular, by the vocation of a theologian who engaged the social order with civil courage and ultimate honesty. He had never met a theologian who encouraged robust engagement in the social order or attention to politis, race and literature; and Niebuhr's example opened up new vocational possibilities. In my view, *the spirit of Niebuhr's theology is present every time* we hear Bonhoeffer say after 1931 that grace without ethical obedience is a mockery of the Cross and that Christ calls us into the midst of the world's conflicts and crises; when he says, in "After Ten Years," that "civil courage" and "costly discipleship" depend " on a

God who demands responsible action in a bold venture of faith, and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the person who becomes a sinner in that venture."[14]

The American Organizing Tradition

Even more formative than Bonhoeffer's encounter with Niebuhr were his experiences in and outside the classroom with representatives of what we might call the American organizing tradition. I refer here to the tradition of progressive Protestant thought characterized by the commitment to piecemeal social reform and the disciplines of community building and organizing.

Since Niebuhr's arrival at Union in 1928, a cadre of Christian social reformers had turned to him for moral and financial support, and time and again, Niebuhr offered it graciously. In his marvelous book, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959*, Anthony Dunbar writes that "without [Niebuhr's] inspiration and practical assistance these movements might not have existed or succeeded to the extent that they did."[15] Niebuhr's encouraging presence and his organizing and fundraising expertise are pervasive in the letters and exchanges of the intentional communities and congregational initiatives that arose and flourished in a remarkably fertile period of American social theology.

Most of the participants in these communities and initiatives worked steadfastly in the tradition of social gospel idealism; which is to say, in the earnest hopes of building the Kingdom of God on earth. Clarence Jordan, one of the founders of the Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia (which later launched the organization Habitat for Humanity)

described the mission of the interracial cooperative farm in southwest Georgia as "a demonstration plot for the Kingdom." Of course, these faith-based social reformers hardly had time to sift through the complex ways in which Niebuhr's emerging Christian realist views called into question their own idealism. It speaks to Niebuhr's sensitivities and wisdom, I think, that even as he was rejecting many of the theological and anthropological presuppositions of the Social Gospel, he embraces the socially transformative energies of the movement, encourages innovation and does not discourage utopianism *at the ground level*. He remained grateful for the work of visionaries, dreamers and idealists, an admirer of the women and men who made great sacrifices to build hope and justice in places of exclusion and distress, and unfailingly affirmed such initiatives as the Delta Cooperative Farm, the Providence Farm Cooperative, the Highlander Folk School, Koinonia Farm, and the numerous other experiments in Christian community arising in the South and around the nation—an admirer even as his own hopes for this-worldly reform were chastened by the sober appraisals of Christian realism.[16]

Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer's knowledge of the American organizing tradition began in his studies with two great teachers at Union, Harry Ward and Charles Webber, and deepened through first-hand participation in their classes in local church-based organizing—as well as in friendships with such theological visionaries as James Dombrowski and Myles Horton.

Let me introduce you briefly to Charles C. Webber, though sadly I must skip Ward for purposes of time. I refer to you to the first-rate biography written by the

scholar, David Nelson Duke, *Harry F. Ward and the Struggle for Social Justice*, recently reprinted in a paperback edition by the University of Alabama Press.

Charles C. Webber was a pastor, organizer, professor of practical theology at Union and author of the book, *A History of the Development of Social Education in the United Neighborhood Houses of New York*. In the 1950s and 1960s he was the National AFL-CIO Representative, and the Industrial Secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Webber's course, "Church and Community", which Bonhoeffer took in the fall semester,[] resembled what we would later call in the United States as a "service-learning experience", though it was much more than that. Webber used the course to introduce seminarians to the lived theologies of a city in the throes of economic distress and to the impressive variety of Christian social ministries in New York. He arranged site visits for students and accompanied them as they journeyed beyond the campus to observe and take part in organizing initiatives based in the churches.

"In connection with a course of Mr. Webber's", Bonhoeffer wrote, "I paid a visit almost every week to one of these character-building agencies: settlements, Y.M.C.A., home missions, co-operative houses, playgrounds, children's courts, night schools, socialists schools, asylums, youth organizations, Association for advance of coloured people. …It is immensely impressive to see how much personal self-sacrifice is achieved, with how much devotion, energy and sense of responsibility the work is done."[17]

The students visited the National Women's Trade Union League and the Workers Education Bureau of America; discussed "labor problems, restriction of profits, civil

rights, juvenile crime, and the activity of the churches in these fields"[18]; and studied the role of churches in selective buying campaigns and public policy, drawing on models and insights gleaned from the British Cooperative Movement, whose work Webber praised.

The class also met with officials from the American Civil Liberties Union, the nation's premier defender of civil liberties which after its founding in 1920 had focused heavily on the rights of conscientious objectors and the protection of resident aliens from deportation. When Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin in the summer of 1931, he told his brother that Germany would need an ACLU of its own.[19] It is important that we recognize his deep commitment to civil liberties. Through his field work with Charles Webber, this nearly forgotten professor of practical theology, Bonhoeffer found a pathway from the theological classroom to the concrete social situation of Church in the world.[20]

In his personal recollection of his cousin's year in the United States, included in the recently-published volume X of the Bonhoeffer Works, Hans Christoph von Hase said that Bonhoeffer learned so much in America, "more than he probably realized". "He learned something that was missing in German theology—the grounding of theology in reality."[21] Whether or not this is a fair claim, what is true is that Bonhoeffer experienced, for the first time, the teaching of theology "to and from embodied, situated particularity" (in Serene Jone's words).[22] He saw, and he felt, the presence of Christ in these spaces of reconciliation and redemption existing outside the walls of the parish church.[23]

The circle of Christian social reformers which Bonhoeffer joined at Union also included such energetic and colorful characters as John King Gordon (a Christian ethicist from Canada who was later editor of *the Nation* and the first human rights officer at the United Nation), William Klein (a Presbyterian minister who later directed the rural school improvement at Berea College in Kentucky and worked in racial reform from his position at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina), and Gaylord White ("head [from 1901] of the Union Settlement in East Harlem, an urban ministry venture of Union graduates concerned with fair housing, and public health [Green]). His deepest relationships—from members of the American organizing tradition—were formed with James Dombrowski and Myles Horton.

James Dombrowski was a white Methodist minister born in Florida who attended Union and then Columbia University, earning a Ph.D. in 1933, with the dissertation "The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America."[24] Alongside fellow seminarian Myles Horton, Dombrowski co-founded the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which I'll say a little more about presently, and based his work there from 1933-1942. Dombrowski also established the Conference of Younger Churchmen of the South in 1934, was executive director of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (1942-46), edited the progressive *Southern Patriot* from 1942 until 66, and--in his role as executive director of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (1946-66)--worked behind the scenes with many of the key players in the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott, including E. D. Nixon, the President of Montgomery branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and leader in the National Association for Advancement of Colored

People. Dombrowski was a vital part of a remarkable (and sadly vanished if not vanquished) generation of white southern progressives whose organizing and educational efforts prepared the ground for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 60's. Among this company of southern dissidents we should also remember Howard "Buck" Kester, Sherwood Eddy, Lillian Smith, Jessie Daniel Ames, and Lucy Randolph Macon.

Long after Bonhoeffer had laid aside his volumes of William James of Harvard University--whom he read at Union in a year long tutorial with Eugene William Lyman--he inquired of the other James [that is, James Dombrowski) and his new friends and acquaintances from New York who would disperse into various and sundry backwater hamlets and urban centers in pursuit of economic justice and racial equality. Like Myles Horton.

Myles Horton was a country boy born from the riverboat town of Savannah, Tennessee, and surely represents a type of theological student and seminarian at Union inconceivable to Bonhoeffer before his year in America. Horton grew up in southern rural poverty of the sort documented by James Agee and Walker Evans in their landmark volume, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. He was educated a Cumberland College, (a school set up for poor whites in Appalachia), and spent many of his student summers working in vacation Bible schools in the mountains of east Tennessee. He was admitted to Union Theological Seminary—he said later in an interview--only because the seminary was looking for a "token hillbilly".   Whereas the aristocratic Berliner regarded Union theological education as sophomoric, Horton felt intimidated by the

"extremely high" intellectual level at Union, and remained always mindful of his inferior educational and cultural background.[25] It is important not to lose sight of that alternative perception when we listen to Bonhoeffer's complaints.

In 1932 Reinhold Niebuhr wrote an initial fund-raising letter for an organizing initiative called the Southern Mountain School, a project inspired his former students Dombrowski and Horton. The vision was to create an "experimental school specializing in education for fundamental social change."[26] This was, as I mentioned earlier, a fertile time for experimental communities in the United States, and many of these traced their origins to Social Gospel convictions and quite often to seminary courses at Union. In the 1930's and 1940's, the Highlander Folk School emerged as one of the most important training centers in these golden years of progressive Protestant social missions, equipping southern workers with skills for labor negotiations and mobilization and helping launch the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO); in the 1950's, Highlander turned its attention from labor to the burgeoning civil rights movement and helped train a generation of church-based organizers that included such brilliant theological activists as Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

These representatives of the American organizing tradition "were probably some of the most radical Christians with whom Bonhoeffer ever associated," Clifford Green notes, "and they were radicals not only in theory….They worked on urban and rural poverty, on racial justice and civil rights, on union organizing, on peacemaking, and at the United Nations. Interestingly, some of them had careers analogous to Bonhoeffer himself, being expelled from academic appointments, imprisoned, and persecuted by

the law." These men and women must surely be counted among the greater "cloud of witnesses" of which Bonhoeffer had gone in pursuit. Though it is unlikely they shared similar theological views, [they] were all "committed to Christian praxis, to lives and careers that were lived in devotion to Jesus, and to the "public, communal, and political" requirements of the Gospel[27]

African American Christian Tradition

The achievement of the recently published translation of Bonhoeffer's writings from America as a whole, which I highly commend to you, is not only that of highlighting the interconnections between progressive Christian organizing in America in the 1930's and Bonhoeffer's theological transformations. It is also its delineation of "the thread" that links the New York experiences into a coherent life story. The thread that weaves through Bonhoeffer's development in these years and over the coming decade, the thread that gives these years personal and spiritual coherence is precisely this journey from the "phraseological to the real."

Nowhere in Bonhoeffer's first American encounters is that journey rendered more vividly than in his intense involvement in African American Christian spirituality and in the churches of Harlem, to which I now turn.

Niebuhr's work was challenging; the American organizing tradition was inspiring; but the black church felt like an awakening. Bonhoeffer's experiences there brought theological and personal unity to his year. If in his mature theology the redeemed person, "the self in Christ", is the new being who exists in the togetherness of Christian

community, then as Willie J. Jennings has written in his intriguing essay, "Harlem on My Mind: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Racial Reasoning, and Theological Reflection," Bonhoeffer's participation in the black church became "the occasion of a new becoming of the self, a new recognition of himself with and in this community". In the black church, Bonhoeffer experienced a vivid manifestation of the new self in Christ, perhaps his first, the vitality of the Christological self in a worshipping community.

In his academic writings of 1927 through 1930, let us recall, Bonhoeffer had sketched a bold and ambitious critique of the German transcendental tradition. He objected to the tradition's conception of the world-constitutive subject and its forgetfulness of the Reformation axiom that only God is God. Bonhoeffer worked his way through a thicket of complex themes in his 1927-1930 writings from Berlin, and they were beautiful in their unfolding and explication, but also they produced a certain loneliness. These concepts and categories, for all their scholarly benefits, were bereft of singing and laugher. They were sharp but stark.

Certainly, the Christian theologian must heartily affirm God's "being" and God's "act" in formulating the doctrine of revelation; she must say that the meaning of human existence is not found in her own reflections but from the truth revealed in Jesus Christ; the theologian understands that doctrines aspire in their inner logic for social expression. But unless doctrine bursts into life, in preaching, in singing, in friendship, in acts of mercy and justice, doctrine may lead to despair.

When Bonhoeffer arrived for the 1930–31 academic year at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he had encountered black people in twenty-five years. His only

remark in writing came during his fortnight in North Africa, when he noted his complete bewilderment at the sight of “Arabs, Bedouins, and Negroes sitting on donkeys in great, picturesque white cloaks,” traversing the sun-drenched streets of Tripoli in a “colorful throng of peculiar figures”. Race, or racism, had not been of concern.

But early in that fall semester of 1930 at Union, an African American seminarian named Franklin Fisher befriended the young Berliner and led him gently into a new ecclesial world of African American Christianity and, I would add, *into a new way of being a Christian.*

Frank Fisher was the son of a Baptist minister in Alabama and had been assigned to the Abyssinian Baptist Church as a pastoral intern. His invitation to Bonhoeffer to join him one Sunday marked the beginning of an intense six-month immersion in the African American congregation. In time, Bonhoeffer, the straight arrow Lutheran theologian, would begin teaching a Sunday school class for boys and a Wednesday evening Women’s Bible Study, and also assist in various youth clubs. On at least occasion, he preached in the pulpit of the esteemed Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.

Myles Horton vividly recalled an exchange with Dietrich on a Sunday just after he had returned from a morning at the Gothic and Tudor sanctuary on 138th Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues. “[Bonhoeffer] was excited and talkative,” Horton said, “and instead of going to his room he described the preaching with excitement and audience participation and especially the singing of black spirituals. He was very emotional and did not try to hide his feelings, which was extremely rare for him. He said it was the only time he had experienced true religion in the United States, and was

convinced that it was only among blacks who were oppressed that there could be any real religion in this country."[28] (By the way, that is Albert Raboteau's point in his astonishing essay, "American Salvation", published in the Boston Review in summer 2005).

"Perhaps that Sunday afternoon," Horton commented, "I witnessed a beginning of his identification with the oppressed which played a role in the decision that led to his death. Certainly I witnessed an insight that too few of my countrymen appreciate."

In his theological friendship with Frank Fisher, Bonhoeffer gained "a detailed and intimate knowledge of the realities of Harlem life" [Bethge]. And he also learned quickly of the harsh realities of African American life in pre-civil rights America. "When it became clear on one occasion that he and Fisher would not be seated in a Manhattan restaurant, he staged a two man protest and left the restaurant in an outrage. On Thanksgiving Day 1930, Bonhoeffer joined Fisher and his relatives for turkey and trimmings in Washington D.C. , and later that same academic year, he drove through the Deep South on an auto tour of the country, observing rural poverty and the reign of Jim Crow the same fateful month nine young black men were accused of raping two white women on a freight train, and convicted in a mob atmosphere in successive trials in Scottsboro, Alabama.

Bonhoeffer's presence at Abyssinian in 1930-1931 coincided with significant transformations in Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.'s vocational understanding as a minister in an urban congregation. Powell had been the senior pastor since 1908. He was an eloquent preacher and a skilled administrator. But as the Great Depression swept over

the neighborhoods of Harlem, Powell was inspired to new spiritual perceptions as a pastor and citizen. In his memoir *Upon This Rock* he said he began to see a Jesus who wandered the streets of Harlem, standing with the poor and distressed as friend and counselor.[29] "Day and night I heard the voice of [the Savior] say, 'I was naked and yet clothed me. I was hungry and ye fed me.'" Powell spoke of the Christian's mission to "preach the unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ", to bear witness to the "living reality of God", and to make "Jesus Christ real in America and real in the world."[30] And he invited the young German theologian into the full life of the community.

Rudolf Schade, who later taught at Reinhold Niebuhr's alma mater, Elmhurst College, recalled an encounter with Bonhoeffer on a Monday morning after his first experience of preaching at Abyssinian. Bonhoeffer was still elated, and "beaming and enthusiastic," and he asked Schade to take a walk along Riverside Drive. Speaking excitedly in German, Bonhoeffer shared the previous day's events and impressions and conveyed the thrill and joy of having had members of the congregation respond to his message. "The church people had voiced their agreement with his points by punctuating his sermon with 'Amens' and 'Hallelujahs."[31] He had never experienced such joy in worship.

Paul Lehmann, a fellow student and later professor of Christian ethics at Union, wondered, curiously, if Bonhoeffer were not spending too much time in Harlem.[32] As early as October, Bonhoeffer signed up for a "Trip to Negro Centers of Life and Culture in Harlem"; he secured a large bibliography on "The Negro" compiled by the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library, and also various orienting articles about the

NAACP, the civil rights struggle, and legal aspects of the race issue. Lehmann was a little perplexed by how relentlessly Bonhoeffer pursued "the understanding of the [Negro] problem to its minutest detail through books and countless visits to Harlem."[33] It was as if Bonhoeffer had forged "a remarkable kind of identity with the Negro community," Lehmann said.

Bonhoeffer's experienced personal renewal and theological transformation in his brief but decisive participation in the black church and in friendships with Frank Fisher and the other African Americans who welcomed him into their homes. His cousin Christoph von Hase would say that this renewal "prepared him to summon the Confessing Church after 1933 to defend persecuted Jews," "and to become engaged at great risk to himself in rescuing individuals."[34] The young philosophical theologian who had found American social theology an offense to doctrinal correctness now declared, "It is the problem of concreteness in our ministry that at present so occupies me."

He was soon calling into question unexamined assumptions that governed the German church and academy and to rethink the nature of the theological vocation. His great biographer Eberhard Bethge tells us that Bonhoeffer began going to church. It may sound surprising that despite the internship in Barcelona, he had never taken much of an interest in public worship at least until his time at Abyssian. He fell in love with the Bible and began practicing a rich devotional life, centered on the Moravian Prayer Book, which his governess had given him as a child. He organized spiritual retreats, often held at his hut in the forest near Brenau, and encouraged his students to read Scripture with an openness to God's voice and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. He

advocated oral confession of sins and was drawn into an intimate reading of the Sermon the Mount. Colleagues at the university were at first taken aback by these "monkish" practices and made jokes about the ascetic disciplines appearing in the ranks of the "evangelische" faculty.[35] But Bonhoeffer was now moving in response to a new understanding of the Christian life; and, as we know, he would only come to speak more passionately of communities of "obedience and prayer", of conformation with Christ, and of spiritual disciplines that bring "purification, clarification and concentration upon the essential thing", as he wrote in *Life Together*.[36]

Under the influence of this "cloud of witnesses," his understanding of the Lutheran doctrine of justification shifted in dramatic ways. He would never again think of grace as a one-sided affirmation spoken by God to sinful humanity but a partnership between the divine and the human enacted out in costly discipleship and in the Christ-shaped polyphony of life. His interest in the essential present form of grace" was transformed into the more urgent matter of how Christians should act "under the constraint of grace" and in obedience to Jesus.[37] The grace that frees is the grace that forms, and conformation to Christ became the key that united doctrinal and practical concerns in the theological vocation.

What became of his friend and mentor Frank Fisher? Reverend Fisher graduated from Union, taught at Morehouse College for a spell, and then in 1948 assumed a pastorate at the West Hunter Street Baptist Church in Atlanta. Fisher's tenure began in 1948 and ended with his death in 1960 at the age of fifty-one, as Atlanta was taking center stage in the civil rights movement in the South. He helped quietly build a vital

and nurturing Christian community in a city and region divided by race; and the church flourished in Fisher's years of ministry. In 1957, he was one of numerous ministers arrested with Martin Luther King, Jr. for attempting to integrate Atlanta's buses during the Triple L. Campaign. Ralph Abernathy took over pastoral duties at West Hunter after Fisher's death.

III

As I have learned the story of Bonhoeffer's year in America, I have come to see that it offers helpful lessons for our work at the Project on Lived Theology, and I would hope too for our considerations this weekend of theology and practice. In a profound sense, those of us gathered here, despite differences of specialization, theological method, denominational background, and the like, share a commitment to creating *spaces* that foster the revitalization of academic theology through practice. I think of the enterprise of lived theology in this way: as the work of creating spaces where the turning from the phraseological to the real is enabled and nourished. We surely do not presume to script the work of the Spirit, to turn the freedom adventurousness of theological growth into a pedagogical formula. Still, I have seen how the imaginative use of resources, coupled with creative organizing and design of programs and events, brings to life spaces that encourage a new way of teaching and writing theology.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not become a practical theologian as such, at least in the sense in which that term is used to describe a field of the discipline; although I would say that the kind of writing he forged in the crucible of the church struggle models the best kind of practical theology: a theology that confesses, that preaches, that prays, that

rejoices, that proclaims the Amen and the Yes, that encourages and sustains the redemptive practices of the church; a theology, which even should the church fall into ruins, cleaves to the mysteries of Christ's presence in the world.

Years ago I surmised in my first book--a monograph on Bonhoeffer's philosophical influences--that the shape of his theological thought differs from Karl Barth, his single greatest influence, in one important respect: in its attention to the worldly shape and experiential detail of divine revelation. Barth's bold retrieval of the language of Christian orthodoxy began with the affirmation of God's aseity, with the priority of God's Trinitarian identity over God's particular ways of being present in experience. Barth argued that in ascribing objectivity to God (as we must do when speaking of God as the source of all things and of Jesus Christ as God's witness to humanity), we must carefully distinguish between God in God's triune life as such--in God's primary objectivity--and God as God comes to humanity in the revelation of Jesus Christ--in God's secondary objectivity. Indeed, the Lordship of Christ over all creation—voiced so unforgettably in the 1934 Barmen Declaration—affirmed the inviolability of the first commandment in an era of life-killing idolatry.

Bonhoeffer's theological journey proceeds along the path opened up by Barth--it is best understood within a Trinitarian framework—even as Bonhoeffer turns his sights to the exquisitely diverse ways Christ is present in the world. Without in any way discounting the magnificent story of God's Triune identity, Bonhoeffer plumbs the depth and breadth of God's presence in human experience with maximum attention, and in

turn crafts vivid theological narrative from the exchanges and transactions of worldly faith.

"We must be more romantic than the romanticist, more humanist than the humanist, but we must be more precise," Barth said in one of my favorite quotes. His life's work was to magnify the terms of that precision. Bonhoeffer's was to live into, and to narrate, that precision as he experienced it in the polyphony and mystery of life in Christ. Bonhoeffer's turning from the phraseological to the real is not then a matter of translating theology to practice; it is about the revitalization of theology as a way of life. It is about theology nourished in shared confessional affirmations and prayerful discernment of the situation, about writing and teaching amidst the struggles and joys—the joyful sorrows, Raboteau's unforgettable words--of disciples in community.

In this manner, the turning from the phraseological to the real reminds us that the relation between academic theology and practical theology is best understood as a mutually enriching dialectic. The tensions ignited in the theological encounter of lived experience are creative and "productive," as Serene Jones wisely notes in her essay, "and the urge to resolve them should be resisted."[38] The turning from the "phraseological to the real" might best be construed as a dialectical pattern essential to the vitality of Christian theology, and thus must be left "irksomely unresolved."

To wit: Bonhoeffer does not stop writing theology after 1931. He would offer a seminar on Hegel's Philosophy of Religion, lectures on 19th century Protestant thought, and the Christology course, which would be published as *Christ the Center*. But Bonhoeffer situates theological teaching and writing in the flow of particular (and

particularly intense) lived pastoral and political realities; and in time, indeed after 1934, the classroom in Berlin became the London pastorate, where he formed alliances with leaders in the ecumenical movement and made sketches for the book on discipleship, the monastic experiment in Finkenwalde, the church struggle, the retreats at the Benedictine monastery in Ettal, the illegal pastorates, and the years of resistance and imprisonment.

Friedrich Nietzsche once said that the Christians would need to sing better songs before he would believe in their redeemer. Christians have beautiful songs to sing, and a reinvigoration of theology and practice, rendered so well in John Witvliet's words, as "the joyful embrace of the…multidimensional complexity of life in community…in view of the larger horizons of God's redemptive action in particular times and places," [148], this reinvigoration and embrace help illuminate the promise of our theological future. We might speak of a social theology that is more liberal than liberalism, more evangelical than evangelicalism, but more precise! And who knows but that this may have happened at Union had Bonhoeffer not left after six weeks in that momentous summer of 1939—and certainly it may still happen yet!

In the end, how sincere we truly are, how desperate and committed we are to this work, is revealed by how demanding we are willing to be on our discipline, how courageous we are to break with academic fashion, if fashion obscures life, how willing we are be honest and accept difficulty.[39] Serene Jones is correct, I think, in her cautious, but encouraging forecast, that "[theologies of practice] may well be poised to take a strong lead—over other disciplines—in charting a new, enlivened course for a

form of theological education that is both globally responsive and intellectually rich"![40] May these two days together help us to clarify the challenges and promises of this new course, borrowing hope from each other, calling on the wisdom of our tradition, the guidance of the spirit and the fellowship of the saints, sharing our joys and sorrows, as we journey together with God in these uncertain but powerful days.

[1] David Nelson Duke, "The Experiment of an Ethic of (Radical) Justice: The Formative Experiences of Bonhoeffer's American Education," The Archives on the Burke Library (Columbia University).

[2] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 174.

[3] Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 3.

[4] Hans Pfeifer, "Learning Faith and Ethical Commitment in the Context of Spiritual Training Groups. Consequences of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Postdoctoral Year at New York City, 1930-31," page 9, forthcoming in the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Yearbook 3*.

[5] 83, June 9, 1929.

[6] Bonhoeffer, 1/85, June 19, 1929

[7] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York*, p. 178.

[8] 2/5, 000. [G353]

[9] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 1928-1931*, English edition edited by Clifford J. Green and translated by Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 306.

[10] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, p. 191.

[11] Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 125.

[12] Bonhoeffer wrote on 1/90, August 7, 1928. to his friend [] Rößler of the contrast between his former academic life as a student and his current life as the pastor of the German-speaking congregation: in the latter, "work and life genuinely converge, a synthesis that we all probably sought but hardly found in our student days-- when one really lives *one* life rather than two, or better: half a life; it lends dignity to the work and objectivity to the worker, and a recognition of one's own limitations [*Grenzen*] of the sort acquired only within concrete life."Niebuhr cited in *Bonhoeffer Works*, Volume 10, p. 403, and in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 160. After returning to Berlin, Bonhoeffer wrote in a correspondence with Detlef Albers, the teacher of history and geography at the German Protestant school in Barcelona, "Perhaps today . . . 'spirit' [*Geist*] really is to be found in the particular, that is, precisely in the 'material,' in concretely given reality—and precisely not in 'intellectuality' [*Geistigkeit*].

[13] Bonhoeffer, like MLK later, would say to Niebuhr that your conception of love is too transcendent.

[14] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years," Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 6.

[15] Anthony Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981), p. 41.

[16] For more on the intentional community movement in the United States, see Tracy Elaine K' Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South: The Story of Koinonia Farm* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997); Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *The Intentional Community Movement: Building a Moral World* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975); and Martin B. Duberman's excellent study, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973).

[17] Bonhoeffer cited in Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 84.

[18] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 162. It is not clear whether Bonhoeffer knew of the FOR until coming to the United States, even though the peace organization was founded in 1914 at a railroad station in Germany when an English Quaker named Henry Hodgkin and the German Lutheran social reformer Friedrich Sigmund-Schultze pledged to partner in peace making even though the two countries were at war. :Out of this pledge Christians gathered in Cambridge, England in December 1914 to found the Fellowship of Reconciliation. The FOR-USA was founded one year later, in 1915.

[19] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 162.

[20] "Christian Socialism," *Time,* Monday, May 11, 1931.

[21] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin, Berlin, New York*, p. 602.

[22] Serene Jones, "Practical Theology in Two Modes," *For Life Abundant*, p. 201.

[23] Christoph von Hase, "From the Phraseological to the Real," *Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 1928-1931*, English edition edited by Clifford J. Green and translated by Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 597.

[24] See Frank T. Adams, *James A. Dombrowski: An American Heretic, 1897-1983*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992. His dissertation was published as *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America.* Bibliography: News York: Columbia University Press, 1936.

[25] Myles Horton, *The Long Haul*, p. 35.

[26] Dale Jacobs in *The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change*, edited by Dale Jacobs (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), p. 33.

[27] Clifford Green, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 1928-1931*, p. 34.

[28] Letter to Martin Rumscheidt, December 17, 1986; Bonhoeffer Collection, Union Theological Seminary. First published in the *Newsletter*, International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, No. 39 (October 1988), 3-4.
[29] Clayton Powell, Sr., *Upon This Rock*, p. 42.

[30] Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., "What Has the Church Done for the Negro and What Will the Negro Do For the Church?", *Upon This Rock*, p. 110.

[31] Zerner, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's American Experiences," 269.

[32] Ruth Zerner, , "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's American Experiences: People, Letters and Papers from Union Seminary" Paper Delivered at the February 4-8, 1976 International Bonhoeffer Congress, Geneva, Switzerland, p. 11.

[33] Paul Lehmann cited in Christoph von Hase, "From the Phraseological to the Real," *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Berlin, New York, 1928-1931*, p. 597.

[34] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "From the Phraseological to the Real," *Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 1928-1931*, pp. 597-598.

[35] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 203.

[36] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 203.

[37] Eberhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 182.

[38] Serene Jones, "Practical Theology in Two Modes," *For Life Abundant*, p. 201.

[39] Ibid., p. xxxxviii.

[40] Serene Jones, "Practical Theology in Two Modes," *For Life Abundant*, p. 211.