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BONHOEFFER ON LOVE

Dedicated to Risto Saarinen, for his 60th birthday

The creative scholarship of Risto Saarinen concerning the broader phenomenon of "love" has provided welcome assistance to the theological, religious, and academic world's attempts to illuminate this intriguing field,¹ an undertaking in which I myself feel a profound connection with him.² The following discussion will consider the understanding of love from one of our classic partners in this theological undertaking, namely, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.³

I. Love in the Power of the Spirit—the Young Bonhoeffer's ingenious reflections 1926-1927 (DBWE 9 and DBWE 1)

At 7:00 a.m. on September 21, 1925, Dietrich Bonhoeffer accompanied his professor Reinhold Seeberg to the Berlin train station, who had offered the young student this opportunity to speak with him about plans for a doctoral dissertation. Just two

¹ Picking up on Phil 4:2f: Risto Saarinen, "Syzygy: Love Made Strange," *Dialog. A Journal of Theology*, Vol. 50/1 (2011), 71-80; further, idem, "Love from afar: distance, intimacy and the theology of love," *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 14 (2012), 131-47; idem, "Liebe, Anerkennung und die Bibel. Die Gabetheorien der heutigen Theologie," in: M. Welker and G. Oberhänsli-Widmer (ed.), *Liebe, Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 29 (2014) (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2015), 321-38.

² Michael Welker, "Romantic Love, Covenantal Love, Kenotic Love," in: John Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and London: SPCK, 2001), 127-36; idem, "'Rooted and Established in Love': The Holy Spirit and Salvation," in: Jeffrey W. Barbeau and Beth Felker Jones (ed.), *Spirit of God: Christian Renewal in the Community of Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 183-93; idem, "Geist und Liebe," in: *Liebe, Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*, vol. 29 (2014), 271-81.

³ The references in the following text refer to Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 1-17, Augsburg Fortress Publishers.

years later, Bonhoeffer submitted his inspired piece *Sanctorum communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (DBWE I) at the university of Berlin. After his acceptance as a doctoral candidate during his third year at the university, probably in early 1926, Bonhoeffer delivered a paper in Seeberg's seminar with the title "The Church and the Kingdom of God," which Seeberg corrected on January 22, 1926. Picking up on texts by Reinhold Seeberg, Johannes Weiß, and Emanuel Hirsch, Bonhoeffer works out an understanding of love that far surpasses not only the prevalent philosophical and theological notions of his own time, but much in our time as well, an understanding, moreover, that shapes the enduringly exemplary theological and sociological impulses in his doctoral dissertation.

Whenever what is known as healthy human understanding reflects and speaks about love, it generally thinks of bi-personal relationships, relationships involving I and You, at most perhaps God and the individual, in which case God, however, is often conceived merely as a "counterpart," a "reference point." Nineteen-year-old Dietrich Bonhoeffer, however, inspired as he was by great theological-academic models, speaks instead about love in fundamentally more complex contexts, to wit, about the "entity that has been predetermined by the Father in eternal election, the church community of believers that has been established by the saving action of Christ in history as the spiritual body of the spiritual head. It is kept active by the Holy Spirit by means of living, community-building love" (DBWE 9:314).

In this context, Bonhoeffer is thus understanding love christologically and as being shaped and determined by the Holy Spirit. Love forms a community that it then keeps active through its own living character. In turn, it is shaped within history by the salvific activity of Christ, who is the spiritual head of a spiritual body. Just as breath and blood stimulate and pulsate through our own bodies, so also does love stimulate and pulsate through, and

indeed animate the community of believers. The twenty-year-old Bonhoeffer maintains this lofty perspective during the following semester in a seminar paper on John 15 and Paul. Human beings are to abide in the love that is God the Father's love for the Son and the Son's love for humankind. They abide in this love by keeping the commandments of Jesus Christ. Keeping these commandments, however, rather than being a burden, is instead a tremendous joy. Human beings do what brings joy to Jesus, and precisely in that love come to share his joy (DBWE 9:400).

It is against this background that the young Bonhoeffer can speak repeatedly about love's goal being "to overcome evil" (DBWE 9:538, picking up on Rom 12:21). Here he is particularly inclined to use the expression "alluring love" (DBWE 9:542, 547 ["alluring spirit"], 551), though the question remains whether these references are not incorporating certain romantic notions of incipient partner love back into his understanding. Bonhoeffer will in any case hardly mention such references to "alluring love" in later texts. That his early reflections and conception of love do occasionally revert to rather vague notions and simplistic personal evocations can be seen in his "Catechetical Outline concerning the Second Article of Faith," which he presented on July 21, 1926, in which he asserts that "God is love; God is joy; God is holy seriousness" before concluding, however, with the wish that he might "walk hand in hand with my Lord Jesus on my life's path" and "be allowed to delight in being a child of God forever" (DBWE 9:501). It is, of course, difficult to avoid the impression that Bonhoeffer the student has not yet quite taken entirely seriously the kind of practical theology that will later become so profoundly important for him.

In his dissertation, however, Bonhoeffer merges into a single context God's dominion in his kingdom and God's love, maintaining that "God's will to rule is the will to love God's church community. This is how intimately the concepts of God's rule and

of God's kingdom are interconnected; and yet they must be distinguished logically, materially, and, as we can now add, sociologically" (DBWE 1:177). Bonhoeffer can then join Luther in maintaining concerning those who share God's love in Christ and who practice that love toward each other: "We are God through the love that makes us charitable toward our neighbor" (DBWE 1:178). That is, it is in love itself that a person becomes God for another person—a rather steep assertion that Bonhoeffer explicates as follows: "One person bears the other in active love, intercession, and forgiveness of sins, acting completely vicariously. This is possible only in the church community of Christ, and that itself rests . . . on the love of God" (DBWE 1:191). In Bonhoeffer's view, "the unity of the Christian church is *not based on human unanimity of spirit*, but on *divine unity of Spirit*" (DBWE 1:198). He speaks repeatedly about the *sanctorum communio* as a community of love, about love as the living principle of the community, and about the kingdom of God as the victory of God's love. Here, however, one cannot so easily distinguish between the church, on the one hand, and God's kingdom, on the other.

II. Jesus Christ and the Love that is "stronger than death" (DBWE 10, 2, 11, 12, 3) 1928-1933

In his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum communio*, Bonhoeffer speaks about how God's dominion in the form of his love is to be understood as God's "service" to humanity. In his writings in Barcelona during 1928/29, especially in presentations and lectures for his church there, he cultivates this position further especially from the perspective of christology and a theology of the cross: "In Jesus of Nazareth, the bearer of God's revelation, God inclines toward the sinner. Jesus seeks the company of sinners, follows them with limitless love . . . God's love is wherever Jesus is . . . Jesus's death on the cross of the criminal, however, shows that divine love extends even to the death of the criminal." Picking up

on the Song of Solomon 8:6, Bonhoeffer maintains that love is stronger than death; that is "the meaning of Good Friday and of Easter Sunday" (DBWE 10:356; see also the sermon on Remembrance Sunday, November 25, 1928, DBWE 10:537-38).

On the basis of the confession and recognition that "God is love," Bonhoeffer is then able, in his inaugural dissertation, to level trenchant criticisms at various metaphysical concepts of God (e.g., as "divine continuity of being," the "sheer 'is,'" or the "eternal 'is,'" DBWE 2:75).

In his baptism sermon on Pentecost Sunday 1932 (DBWE 11:440-42), Bonhoeffer develops the assertion from 1 John 4:16 that "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." Klaus and Paula Bonhoeffer's son Thomas, Bonhoeffer's nephew, is being baptized, and the ceremony takes place at the home of the grandparents, Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer maintains that "God is love—from today on in the life of this child that is no longer a general word of wisdom . . . but is the real, only indestructible basis on which his whole life is built. It is truth, and it is reality. That is the meaning of baptism." Although the assertion "God is love" may come across as merely a well-intentioned exaggeration, or at least as something religiously self-evident in any case, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that "when the love of God is spoken about, we are speaking about something that simply cannot at all be taken for granted, something improbable, unbelievable . . . The laws of human life are broken through when God's love comes over a person" (DBWE 11:440-441). "When God's love comes over a person"—Bonhoeffer can also say, "God's love stands over a person"—then that person's life "has been stripped of its last selfish inclination and has been won for God." "Whoever abides in love takes not the prescribed path of excellence in the world but his own, often incomprehensible, often foolish paths. He lacks the last bit of worldly cleverness that is called selfishness. But in these foolish, strange paths the one who

has eyes to see will see some of the glow from the glory of God himself" (DBWE 11:442).

Jesus Christ brought this essentially revolutionary love onto the cross, and it is through precisely this love that human beings are truly liberated, sinners saved, and evil disempowered (DBWE 11, e.g., 426-27; 470-71). And it is also with precisely this miraculous love that God repeatedly jolts and rouses us. In a sermon on Psalm 63:3[4], "Your steadfast love is better than life," Bonhoeffer explicates this miracle even more precisely, speaking first about the meagerness of our love, both of our love for God as well as that for our neighbor. "God asks us how much his love is worth to us, and we answer him: certainly less than our own. In doing this we banish God's loving kindness from our life" (DBWE 11:407). And now the miracle happens through which God penetrates through to us in his revolutionary and beneficent love, seizes us, transforms us, and thereby wins us for true freedom and indeed for true life.

Bonhoeffer, however, is unable to maintain this lofty level in his theology consistently during the years 1932 and 1933. And although he does courageously address various ideological developments and misanthropic tendencies emerging within his political and ecclesiastical surroundings, his work nonetheless occasionally exhibits views and statements that can cause difficulty for those who are familiar with his work and appreciate his theology. In the memorandum "The Social Gospel" from the winter semester 1932/33, he remarks with some distancing himself that "Jesus is God's revelation, to the extent that he embodied his teaching in his life. His cross is the symbol for his complete devotion to the ideal of brotherly love" (DBWE 12:239). In an essay written during this same semester, "Thy Kingdom Come! The Prayer of the Church Community for God's Kingdom on Earth" (DBWE 12:285-97), he writes that only those "who love the Earth and God *as one*, can believe in God's kingdom" (DBWE 12:286, my italics). He repeatedly speaks about how God's

kingdom acquires form within the state, to wit, how "the form in which the kingdom of God is attested as order we call—the *state*" (DBWE 12:293; see also 293ff). He deals extensively with the relationship between state authority and love (in critical discussion with Wilhelm Lütgert, the successor of Bonhoeffer's dissertation advisor, Seeberg, in Berlin), as well as with that between a people's *nomos*, on the one hand, and the *nomos* of love, on the other (DBWE 12:206-9). Several documents dating to these years involving critical readings of publications by his colleagues and church leaders have come down to us (DBWE 12:260ff), as well as attempts to articulate his independent scholarly and intellectual relationship with them. Although Bonhoeffer's reflections on the topic of love still remain relatively imprecise and undeveloped in his 1933 book *Creation and Fall*, he does nonetheless strongly emphasize there the polarity between "love and hate" that will remain an important component of his thinking on this subject during the following years. Otherwise he articulates these reflections on the love between man and woman in starkly personalistic figures and various negative statements concerning sexuality (DBWE 3:98ff).

III. "God is Love" and Interpersonal Love (1933-1937/39) (DBWE 13, 14, 5)

On October 17, 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer begins his parish ministry in London, and on April 15, 1935, he returns to Germany. In numerous sermons during this London period, Bonhoeffer continues to develop his understanding of the relationship between, on the one hand, the love that, as he puts it, comes "from God's self," (DBWE 13:388) and for just that reason never ends (1 Cor 13:4-7), and, on the other hand, human love. Of particular importance in this context are several sermons on 1 Cor 13 (DBWE 13:375ff) that culminate in a sermon on 1 Cor 13:13 on

Reformation Sunday 1934: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

Bonhoeffer continues to maintain during these years that God's love is a revolutionary power that can quickly confront us with enormous challenges: "Where people say something is despicable God calls it blessed"; "Where people turn their eyes away in indifference or arrogance, God gazes with a love that glows warmer there than anywhere else" (DBWE 13:344). Such statements can give the rather frightening impression that God's love "hurts so much, that your grace is so stern" (DBWE 13:351). At the same time, Bonhoeffer ardently emphasizes the efficacious power of love among human beings without which no person can live and in which the very meaning of life itself is fulfilled. He repeatedly emphasizes the power of love characterizing every kindness and every truth, the love through which even the most difficult adversaries are overcome and which always accompanies perfect truth (DBWE 13:375f, 378f, 389, et passim). Whereas hate fails to recognize one's neighbor, and indifference misses that person altogether, love leads us to know a person fully and completely (DBWE 13:389). Finally, Bonhoeffer similarly highlights the significance even of properly understood self-love, the necessity, that is, of also nurturing "compassion for our own poor souls" (DBWE 13:396).

After Bonhoeffer's return to Berlin, the christological focus of his understanding and articulation of love moves increasingly to the forefront, finally coming to expression in 1939 in his book *Life Together* (DBWE 5). Jesus Christ, in whom is "all truth, all righteousness, all freedom, and all love" (DBWE 14:911; cf. also 602 on 2 John 16), not only speaks the commandment: "love one another," but also demonstrates this very love. Bonhoeffer now connects this "love among one another" with the notion of "living in peace." Jesus Christ brings peace, and "spiritual love creates the *freedom* of Christians under the Word" (DBWE 5:32).

In general during these years, and especially in his book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer makes a discernible effort to differentiate between the various types of love—emotional and spiritual love, Eros and Agape, Eros as both pious and impious urge, etc. (see DBWE 5:42f, 44f, 38f). He similarly repeatedly addresses the relationship between love, mercy, and justice (DBWE 5:33f, 99f, 115f, 170f). One insight that eventually acquires central significance is that of God's love as "forgiveness of one's enemies," a topic that has concerned Bonhoeffer since his work on the 1937 volume *Discipleship* and which derives from his exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount; this love is revealed with unmistakable clarity on the cross of Jesus Christ (DBWE 5:175f).

IV. Merciful Love and Love for One's Enemies (1937-1940) (DBWE 4, 15)

"God's merciful love lives in the midst of its foes." Bonhoeffer writes this sentence in the preface to his book *Discipleship* (DBWE 4:40) with reference to Psalm 110:2: "The Lord sends out from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes" (NRSV). God rules through God's love. And God's love is directed especially to the poor and lowly (DBWE 4:106 et passim). Yet it is directed in an equally focused fashion to sinners and even to God's adversaries. Bonhoeffer continues in the preface to *Discipleship*: "It is the same Jesus Christ who by grace calls us to follow him and whose grace saves the thief on the cross in his last hour"; "Jesus died on the cross alone, abandoned by his disciples. It was not two of his faithful followers who hung beside him, but two murderers. But they all stood beneath the cross: enemies and the faithful, doubters and the fearful, the scornful and the converted, and all of them and their sin were included in this hour in Jesus' prayer for forgiveness. God's merciful love lives in the midst of its foes" (DBWE 4:40).

In his book *Discipleship*, just as repeatedly elsewhere in his work, Bonhoeffer intimately associates the theology of the cross with the ethos of love: "Service to sisters and brothers . . . is . . . the path to the cross" (DBWE 4:125), a statement that may well appear rather bold or even objectionable, especially when taken out of context. Although the phenomenon of devoted, self-sacrificial, "kenotic" love is familiar enough, people tend to associate love much more strongly either with the rapture of romantic love or with the faithful love of family and friendship, the kind of faithful (covenantal) love that is willing to go "though thick and thin," through the "highs and lows" of life. Such love is, of course, quite prepared to endure suffering and indeed does not hesitate to confront situations that may well involve suffering. At the same time, however, in most cases it is sustained by a wealth of experiences of joy both given and received. And even the general love of neighbor of the sort Paul insists we owe to all human beings at all times (Rom 13:8), the general disposition of philanthropy with all its myriad manifestations of helpfulness and charitable consideration—such love can nonetheless not really be characterized as a "path to the cross" in any general or universal sense. Here Bonhoeffer seems to focus and dramatize his understanding of divine love and the love of Jesus Christ in a way that renders access to his theology somewhat difficult.

One must see that what Bonhoeffer is trying to do here is lay out clearly and unequivocally before us the seriousness and profundity and creativity of God's love. In the process, he criticizes the cozier and more hackneyed notions of God's love, and especially notions or references to God's "cheap grace" (DBWE 4:43). God's intention is nothing less than to overcome evil in this world through God's love, and yet at the same time to recognize human beings as wholly worthy of active participation in precisely this loving struggle with evil. "The passion of Jesus as the overcoming of evil by divine love is the only solid foundation for the disciples'

obedience . . . Participation in the cross is given to the disciples by the call into discipleship. They are blessed in this visible community" (DBWE 4:136f). Such assertions, however, can easily alienate some people, for are suffering and the willingness to suffer not being glorified here in an almost dangerous fashion?

In order to comprehend fully the essence of Bonhoeffer's articulation of the unity of the theology of the cross, on the one hand, and the ethos of love, on the other, one must understand Jesus's entire path as a single journey to the cross, must take utterly seriously the suffering of the world under the power of sin, and must profoundly perceive the breadth of hatred among human beings. Reflections on the Heidelberg Catechism concerning hate as the counterforce to love have helped me personally come to a deeper understanding here. For many years, I found the answer to the fifth question extremely offensive, even repugnant. That answer is: I cannot keep God's law "for I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor." How can one seriously maintain that I am somehow prone by nature to "hate God and my neighbor"? Does such an assertion not portray human beings in an utterly exaggerated fashion as bad and evil?

If we associate "hate" solely with aggressive rage and violence, with persecution, malediction, and combat, then the catechism's statement here does indeed sound shrill and exorbitant. The semantic field of "hate," however, is considerably broader, especially in the biblical languages. According to the most important reference work in German (*Duden der sinnverwandten Wörter*), it also encompasses the much more extensive range of "not being able to love" and "not wanting to love." That is to say, "hate" does not refer merely to hostility, revulsion, resentfulness, and aggression. "Hate" also stands for "no longer being able to bear," "not having time for," "attaching little value to." "Hate" stands for "not finding personable," "having no time for or interest in," "not wanting to have anything to do with," "not being able to

stand," or simply "not liking." That the Heidelberg Catechism is sensitive to the nuances inhering within the considerable breadth of the concept "hate" is evident when it castigates as "hate toward God" even our "silence and connivance" in the face of profanation of the name of God (question 99). With respect to our neighbor, it admonishes us to "defend and promote my neighbor's good name" (question 112)—as a way of respecting that person's human dignity, we might say today.

Bonhoeffer is drawing in this context from a correspondingly broad image of love in the thirteenth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. "Love does no wrong to a neighbor" (Rom 13:10). Love avoids hate and combats hate in all its variations, all the way to that of cold indifference toward God and one's neighbor. And yet this circumspect and farseeing love as a counterforce against evil in the world can neither be taken seriously nor rigorously and consistently practiced without a willingness to endure suffering. This love needs infinite patience, yet also makes a person sensitive and gives true sight, whereas human judging and quick condemnation make us blind, as Bonhoeffer puts it (DBWE 4:171-72).

Finally, Bonhoeffer associates the gift of the power of love with the theologically difficult and challenging reference to justification and sanctification:

"Justification liberates believers from their sinful past. Sanctification makes it possible for them to stay close to Christ, to persevere in their faith, and to grow in love . . . Justification is the new creation of the new human being. Sanctification is their preservation and safekeeping unto the day of Jesus Christ" (DBWE 4:259-60).

Here we encounter a wonderful variant to the oft-cited statement in 1 John 4:16: "Those who abide in love abide in God, and God

abides in them." It is not until one adds to this grand statement not only love for the weak and poor, but also the merciful love of one's enemies does it reach its full depth and at the same time a remarkable proximity to real life.

Bonhoeffer remains focused on this understanding of love during the period of the illegal pastoral seminary (DBWE 15, 1937-1940). We cannot, he maintains, esteem too highly the patience of God's love, nor also the patience of love expected of those in discipleship to Jesus (DBWE 15:357, picking up on 1 Cor 13:7), nor God's love for his enemies—despite the hatred with which God is confronted, nor liberation from the power of sin through this love: "Christ wants to win his victory among the enemies" (DBWE 15:467ff; cf. 558f).

V. God's Love and Love for the World 1940-1945 (DBWE 16, 7, 6, 8)

In his notes and writings during his imprisonment (DBWE 16 and 7), in his *Ethics* (DBWE 6), and in the collected papers published under the title *Letters and Papers from Prison* (DBWE 8), Bonhoeffer develops and deepens several other ideas concerning the relationship between God's love and the love between human beings or love for the world. While's Bonhoeffer's earlier understanding of God's love as love for one's enemies remains constant (e.g., DBWE 6:241ff), he now also emphasizes how gratitude and humility can emerge from experiences of received love (DBWE 16:489f) and how through love, God reveals truth, and through that same truth judges creation (DBWE 16:604f).

Picking up on John 2:15, John 4:4, and other biblical mediations, Bonhoeffer tries to articulate the distinction between good and bad "love of the world." "There is a love of the world that is enmity toward God . . . because it arises from the essence of the world in

itself and not from God's love for the world" (DBWE 6:66). He exhaustively analyzes the so-called "tyrant's love for humanity" and unmasks it as tyrannical contempt for humanity ("the tyrannical despiser of humanity"); so-called "good-natured human love" that is inclined to excuse and repress everything is similarly shown to be nothing more than contempt for humanity (DBWE 6:85ff). He praises the "openness to the world" in Christian love over against "trite worldly wisdom" in the form of radicalism and an all-too-eager inclination to compromise (DBWE 6:156f).

As illuminating as were Bonhoeffer's earlier explications concerning the relationship between love and peace, he now also brings to expression as the root of freedom: God's love for humanity that has been revealed in Jesus Christ the incarnate human being (DBWE 6:232f). Bonhoeffer now turns an unflinchingly critical eye on the liberating power of the cross in an examination of the idolization of death (DBWE 6:91ff). And one might devote an entirely separate treatise to the reflections in his *Ethics* on the topic of "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" (DBWE 6:299-38), which pick up earlier ideas concerning the loving and judging interaction of human beings among one another. This text, distinguishing between an "examination" or "testing" that seeks truth, and one that disguises it, tries to clarify what it means to live from a reception of God's love. The riches of God's love in this sense, however, are disclosed only if we gratefully accept the fullness of all that God has revealed and bequeathed to us in Jesus Christ (DBWE 6:334ff).

In Bonhoeffer's letters from prison, the notion of the "polyphony of life," of the divine life and of human life, now acquires central significance. He also emphasizes this polyphony, however, with respect to love—in this case over against its widespread reduction to erotic love (DBWE 8:393f), which is invariably accompanied by a loss of precisely such polyphony. We can, however, learn to love life and honor God at the same time by acquiring through faith in

Jesus Christ the proper relationship with this polyphony of life (DBWE 8:266).

Unfortunately, Dietrich Bonhoeffer never quite succeeded in reinforcing and cultivating these ideas further from the perspective of the Holy Spirit. His early writings are dominated by an understanding of the spirit shaped by Hegel and a more popularized form of Hegelianism. Although Bonhoeffer was indeed able to move past this particular understanding, he, like most of the theologians of his generation, never entirely succeeded in working out a christologically and biblically based pneumatology. Indeed, in his later writings he says almost nothing about the spirit or the Holy Spirit, and any future theological study of "Bonhoeffer and love" will likely have to commence with a look at precisely this problem.

Conclusion

Even as early as his student days, Bonhoeffer was already developing a christologically and pneumatologically shaped understanding of love. Love, rather than being active merely between two individuals, instead establishes a community and, even more, then animates and maintains that community as an active, living entity. Divine love is determined by Christ's salvific activity within history, and is characterized by what is essentially a revolutionary power, for through it human beings are truly liberated, sinners saved, and evil disempowered. The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ reveal that this love is in fact stronger than death itself, and at the same time it becomes quite clear here that God's love is meant not just for the poor and weak, but for sinners as well, and indeed is to be understood essentially as love for one's enemies.

That said, it is nonetheless not at all so easy for human beings to accept this love and to allow themselves to be seized and shaped by its power. Notwithstanding that this love overcomes even the most resolute adversaries, and even though it bequeaths knowledge of truth, as well as freedom and peace, human beings shrink from the seriousness and power of this love, or even oppose it outright. Yet "God's merciful love lives in the midst of its foes" (DBWE 4:40).

At the same time, Bonhoeffer criticizes various cozy, trite notions of God's love. With respect to Christ's cross, it becomes clear that God's love intends to overcome all manifestations of the world's hostility and hate. In gratitude, humility, patience, and in the power of hope, we accept this love and try to implement and practice it each in our own way, for it is knowledge of Christ that discloses for us the rich polyphony of this love. And it is Christ's person and life that reveal for us the paths this love can take along with the freedom and profound joy it bequeaths—even or especially in the dark and distressing periods of our earthly life.