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On Unspeakable Hope

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Apokatastasis¹

Markus Engel

1 Introduction

Eric Metaxas' New York Times bestseller *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* made a large impact on the evangelical reception of the German theologian. The new biography also kindled the debate how Bonhoeffer is to be interpreted. Joseph McGarry, a Bonhoeffer scholar and member of the American Academy of Religion, commented in 2011 on Metaxas' reception of Bonhoeffer as a „theologically conservative evangelical“.² He attempts to refute this view by showing that Bonhoeffer holds to „pessimistic universalism“.³ This term has its origin in an article by Tom Greggs, published in *Modern Theology*. Greggs, professor of historical and doctrinal theology at the University of Aberdeen, writes that Bonhoeffer deals with the topic of universal salvation throughout his whole work.⁴ McGarry agrees and states that „there are numerous doors open to the universal salvation of all within Bonhoeffer's theology“ and concludes that conservative American evangelicalism would receive Bonhoeffer's theology much more negatively if it was aware of his position towards the universal salvation of all.⁵ This shows that the topic of Bonhoeffer and *apokatastasis* is in need of a new examination, which takes work from all periods of his life into consideration. By chronologically examining a few core passages from all periods of his work, this paper will show that Bonhoeffer excluded the idea of *apokatastasis*, meaning the universal salvation of all, from his systematic and practical theology. If anything, it was for him at most a private and unspeakable hope that did not affect his formal teaching.

¹I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Christoph Raedel and Dr. Jennifer Mills for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

²Joseph McGarry, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and apokatastasis. A Challenge to Evangelical Reception, Academia.edu, 2011, 2.

³McGarry, apokatastasis (see Fn. 2), 3.

⁴Tom Greggs, Pessimistic Universalism. Rethinking the Wider Hope with Bonhoeffer and Barth, in: MoTh 26.4 (2010), 495–510, 497.

⁵McGarry, apokatastasis (see Fn. 2), 11.

2 *Academic Writings (1926–1930)*

Through the marvelous scholarship of Eberhard Bethge and many others, the modern reader has the possibility to study Bonhoeffer's work as a whole. The book *Jugend und Studium: 1918–1927 (DBW 9) / The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918–1927 (DBWE 9)* contains essays, papers, journal entries, and letters from the time of Bonhoeffer's early years as a student until the time of his dissertation. If one looks at Bonhoeffer's work chronologically, the first mention of the term *apokatastasis* appears in a paper on *Church and Eschatology* from January 1926, when he was a student of theology in Berlin. The evaluation of one of Bonhoeffer's statements in this paper can bring clarity how he developed his opinion on the eschatology of *apokatastasis*.⁶ This will bring more clarity to the question whether and how his opinion on this controversial doctrine changed throughout his life.

He argues that the Church cannot abandon the eschatology of a dual outcome, while on the other hand, he also states that the theoretical idea of an eschatology of *apokatastasis* does not conflict with the „Christian idea of God“. ⁷ But, he then also argues that the Church can never accept such an idea, because of „the danger to forget the seriousness of grace together with the seriousness of judgement“. ⁸ It is not good for the Church to accept even the theoretical idea of universalism, because it includes the danger of neglecting essential Christian doctrine. He goes on to argue that the Church has to accept the idea that some, who are not seen to be inside the community of the Church, might still be predestined to be saved, but this should not lead the Church to affirm *apokatastasis*. ⁹ He further argues that „the Church is annulling itself“ by accepting universalism. ¹⁰ This is the single strongest statement in Bonhoeffer's work to reject the eschatology of *apokatastasis*. He is aware of some interpretations and theological arguments that can lead to universalism, but he goes so far as to say that even a theoretical option for the universal salvation of all is to be rejected by the Church.

Bonhoeffer's doctoral advisor, Reinhold Seeberg, corrected this specific essay on *Church and Eschatology*. His corrections are accessible to today's reader in the footnotes of the critical edition. Seeberg strongly criticizes Bonhoeffer's rejection of *apokatastasis*. He writes that the Church is able to work against the danger to neglect grace and judgement and questions, and he also questions Bonhoeffer's idea that the Church would be annulling itself by accepting the idea of *apokatastasis*. ¹¹

⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Jugend und Studium. 1918–1927 (DBW 9)*, Gütersloh: GVH, 2015, translation M. E., 336.

⁷Bonhoeffer, DBW 9 (see Fn. 6), 351f.

⁸Bonhoeffer, DBW 9 (see Fn. 6), 352.

⁹Bonhoeffer, DBW 9 (see Fn. 6), 352.

¹⁰Bonhoeffer, DBW 9 (see Fn. 6), 352.

¹¹Bonhoeffer, DBW 9 (see Fn. 6), 352.

It is indeed possible that the young Bonhoeffer has been persuaded by his doctoral advisor. Only a few months later, Bonhoeffer writes an essay on the eschatology of early Lutheranism, in which he criticizes the early Lutherans for plainly rejecting the idea of *apokatastasis*.¹² Eberhard Bethge reports that Bonhoeffer and Seeberg at this point already had multiple disagreements, which led to the situation that Bonhoeffer was evaluating, whether he wanted to write his dissertation under the supervision of Adolf von Harnack.¹³ In September of 1925, he decides to stay under the supervision of Seeberg, which might have led to the fact that Bonhoeffer was forced to accept some of Seeberg's positions on eschatology, which he formerly disagreed with.¹⁴ The high pressure that Bonhoeffer must have experienced in the time of his dissertation could have been one factor that led him to give in to the opinion of a universal salvation of all, an opinion that many influential theologians in Germany held to since the major influence of Schleiermacher. While he does allow the theoretical option of an eschatology of *apokatastasis* in his dissertation, he does reject Schleiermacher's version of this doctrine.

In *Sanctorum Communio*, his dissertation which was accepted in 1927, when he was twenty one years old, Bonhoeffer mentions three times the term *apokatastasis*, which he defines as „the salvation of all“.¹⁵ The first mention of this doctrine is in a footnote on page 171. Bonhoeffer comments on a quote from Schleiermacher, the father of modern liberal theology, and states that „*apokatastasis* can at most be the very last word in eschatological reflection, but not the self-evident point of departure for any theological argument“.¹⁶ Bonhoeffer sees the universal salvation only as a theoretical option for a reflection on the end times and criticizes Schleiermacher for using it as a cop-out for theological problems.¹⁷

The second use of the term is also found in a footnote and is also included in a comment on an idea by Schleiermacher. Bonhoeffer again criticizes Schleiermacher's use of the concept of universal salvation for all, which influences Schleiermacher's claim that „the Holy Spirit is apparently nothing but the consciousness of the species“.¹⁸ Bonhoeffer states in response to this idea that „it is obvious that this approach fails to understand the New Testament“.¹⁹ He does not criticize the principle

¹²Bonhoeffer, DBW 9 (see Fn. 6), 439.

¹³Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times; A Biography, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000, 81.

¹⁴Bethge, Bonhoeffer (see Fn. 13), 81.

¹⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 1 (DBWE 1), Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998, 171, Anm. 29.

¹⁶Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1 (see Fn. 15), 171, Anm. 29.

¹⁷Neither Greggs, nor McGarry comment on the first and second use of the term *apokatastasis*.

¹⁸Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1 (see Fn. 15), 194f.

¹⁹Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1 (see Fn. 15), 195.

of *apokatastasis* directly, but he criticizes Schleiermacher's use and application of this principle.

McGarry and Greggs both comment on the third use of the term in their articles.²⁰ This is the only mention of *apokatastasis* in *Sanctorum Communio* that is not found in Bonhoeffer's footnotes, but in the general text. Bonhoeffer writes:

We must not speak of a dual outcome here without at the same time emphasizing the inner necessity of the idea of apokatastasis. We are unable to resolve this paradox. On the other hand, the concept of the church, as Christ's presence in the world which calls for a decision, necessarily demands the dual outcome. The recognition that the gift of God's boundless love has been received without any merit would, on the other hand, make it seem just as impossible to exclude others from this gift and this love. The strongest reason for accepting the idea of apokatastasis would seem to me that all Christians must be aware of having brought sin into the world, and thus aware of being bound together with the whole of humanity in sin, aware of having the sins of humanity on their conscience. Justification and sanctification are inconceivable for anyone if that individual believer cannot be assured that God will embrace not only them but all those for whose sins they are responsible. But all statements in this regard only express a hope; they cannot be made part of a system.²¹

Joseph McGarry states that this statement can only be understood within the context of a holistic understanding of Bonhoeffer's larger idea of humanity, sin, fall, and redemption that is presented in *Sanctorum Communio*. McGarry summarizes: „today when I sin, humanity falls anew“. ²² Christ makes all of humanity new, which is fallen in Adam and through everybody's individual sin. ²³ McGarry argues that the renewal of humanity must be efficacious for every human being, because every human being is guilty of sin. ²⁴ This means that in order for Christ to completely renew humanity, every human being must also be saved through Christ from damnation and reconciled to God. ²⁵ This „pessimistic view of humanity“ leads Tom Greggs to call Bonhoeffer's version of the belief in the universal salvation of all „pessimistic universalism“. ²⁶ Greggs and McGarry agree in seeing the „co-sinfulness of all humanity“ as Bonhoeffer's primary reason for suggesting this idea of universalism. ²⁷

²⁰ McGarry, apokatastasis (see Fn. 2), 4; Greggs, Universalism (see Fn. 4), 499.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1 (see Fn. 15), 286f.

²² McGarry, apokatastasis (see Fn. 2), 4.

²³ McGarry, apokatastasis (see Fn. 2), 6.

²⁴ McGarry, apokatastasis (see Fn. 2), 5f.

²⁵ McGarry, apokatastasis (see Fn. 2), 5f.

²⁶ Greggs, Universalism (see Fn. 4), 497, 500.

²⁷ McGarry, apokatastasis (see Fn. 2), 6; Greggs, Universalism (see Fn. 4), 500.

Both authors continue to trace this idea and belief in Bonhoeffer's Habilitationsschrift, which was completed in February 1930 and is titled *Act and Being*. Eberhard Bethge writes that *Act and Being* deals mostly with the unity of act and being through the new identity that one finds in Jesus Christ.²⁸ The full title of the book is *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*. Bonhoeffer only makes one direct reference to *apokatastasis* in this book. He writes:

Our discussion of the *actus directus* – as something that can never be captured in reflection (I cannot capture the act in myself, not to mention in someone else) – and of infant baptism – as of faith that excludes itself – allows a perspective to open up in which not all roads appear blocked to the eschatology of *apokatastasis*.²⁹

The *actus directus* is the direct act of faith in the believer, of which Bonhoeffer is unable to pinpoint the process in himself and in others. If faith cannot be „captured in reflection“, one is unable to refute the idea that in the end everyone will be saved, because everyone might actually have accepted Christ.³⁰ In his footnote to this passage, Bonhoeffer quotes Erik Pontoppidan, the founder of the moderate pietism of Denmark and Norway. Pontoppidan states, „now there are many who have truly laid hold of Christ, even though they do not feel that they have done so; but they are no less justified“. ³¹ Because one can not actually reflect on one's process of the act of faith, people may be justified, even if they do not know it. This leads Bonhoeffer to the conclusion that the eschatology of *apokatastasis* may actually be a possible option. But, as well as in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer is also reminding his readers that „this very talk of *apokatastasis* may never be more than the sigh of theology whenever it has to speak of faith and unfaith, election and rejection“. ³² McGarry also notes that Bonhoeffer does no longer see this idea of universal salvation as necessary, but McGarry still calls it an „implication of his [Bonhoeffer's] theology“. ³³

One can conclude that Bonhoeffer's position towards *apokatastasis* is at most a careful consideration and definitely not a dogmatic push. It is important to notice that his first interactions with the topic of the universal salvation of all are critical comments on Schleiermacher's use of the idea of *apokatastasis* as a systematic and dogmatic cop-out of difficult theological problems. Bonhoeffer is not blindly run-

²⁸Bethge, Bonhoeffer (see Fn. 13), 132.

²⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 2 (DBWE 2), Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996, 160.

³⁰Bonhoeffer, DBWE 2 (see Fn. 29), 160.

³¹Pontoppidan qtd. in Bonhoeffer, DBWE 2 (see Fn. 29), 160, Anm. 31.

³²Bonhoeffer, DBWE 2 (see Fn. 29), 160f.

³³McGarry, *apokatastasis* (see Fn. 2), 6.

ning towards a theological abyss of heterodoxy, but he is very aware of the controversy, the „paradox“, and also the possible abuse of the idea of the universal salvation of all.³⁴ When he does comment directly on *apokatastasis*, he develops the idea from his „Christology and hamartiology“ by dwelling on the statement of the „co-sinfulness of all humanity“.³⁵ He never draws his arguments on that topic directly from Scripture, but he rather considers the universal salvation of all an eschatological option that is not refuted by his theological conclusions, but he also warns his readers not to let these considerations become dogmatic. Hans Friedrich Daub, in his doctoral thesis *Die Stellvertretung Christi*, compares Bonhoeffer's and Seeberg's opinion on the idea of *apokatastasis* and summarizes that Bonhoeffer does not want to integrate it into his systematic theology at all, while it has a firm and central place in Seeberg's systematic theology.³⁶ Bonhoeffer's hope for the universal salvation of all rather seems to be coming out of the need to find a way of thinking without the seemingly harsh idea of a double predestination.³⁷ I would partially agree with Joseph McGarry's conclusion on Bonhoeffer's thoughts on *apokatastasis* in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*. McGarry writes that „Bonhoeffer's theology always remains in tension: though apokatastasis cannot be more than a hope and a sigh, he also seems unconcerned to close the doors remaining open to it.“³⁸ In my opinion, Bonhoeffer is not „unconcerned“ to close those doors, he is simply unable to do so.

3 *Discipleship* (1935–1937)

There is no mention of the term *apokatastasis* in Bonhoeffer's work after *Act and Being*. However, there are some passages in his later work that a few theologians interpret as affirming the universal salvation of all. One of these is the following quite dense passage from *Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer writes, „the body of Jesus Christ in which we together with all of humanity are accepted by God³⁹, has now become the foundation of our salvation.“⁴⁰ Whether this passage can be taken as an affirmation of universalism depends on the direct and the broader context of the passage and Bonhoeffer's understanding of soteriology at this point of his life.

³⁴Bonhoeffer, DBWE 1 (see Fn. 15), 286.

³⁵McGarry, *apokatastasis* (see Fn. 2), 8; Greggs, *Universalism* (see Fn. 4), 500.

³⁶Hans Friedrich Daub, *Die Stellvertretung Christi. Ein Aspekt des Gott-Mensch-Verhältnisses bei Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Berlin: Lit, 2006, 110.

³⁷Daub, *Stellvertretung* (see Fn. 36), 111f.

³⁸McGarry, *apokatastasis* (see Fn. 2), 8.

³⁹The German version does not have the term „by God.“

⁴⁰Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4 (DBWE 4), Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001, 214.

The first problem that one faces while reading this particular passage in *Discipleship* is the definition of the term „all humanity“. If „all humanity“ stands here for every human being that has ever lived, one would have to conclude that every human being that has ever lived is „accepted“ into the body of Christ, and, therefore, saved. In the immediate context of the passage, Bonhoeffer is talking about the incarnation. The larger context of the chapter is „the body of Christ“, the Church.⁴¹ The term „body of Christ“ stands for both the human, fleshly body of Christ and the Church. Bonhoeffer is using the double meaning of the term in order to explain the Church from the background of the incarnation. The German term *annehmen* can also be translated as „to take something upon oneself“, and „to accept“. Therefore, when Bonhoeffer writes, „*Gott nimmt die Menschheit an*“, it implies two meanings. Firstly, that God takes humanity upon himself (incarnation of Christ), and secondly that God accepts humanity. In this chapter, he plays with this double meaning and expounds on it quite extensively.⁴² Even the term „accepting humanity“ can have more than one meaning. The term „accepting“ does not have to imply salvation. „Humanity“ can also refer to a principle rather than individual human beings. In order to resolve this paradox, one has to keep reading and closely follow Bonhoeffer's argumentation. On the next page, Bonhoeffer writes: „The Son of God who became human was both, himself and the new humanity. [...] Christ is the second human being (1 Cor 15,47) in whom the new humanity is created. He is the ‚new human being‘“. ⁴³ This shows that the term „humanity“ is in this context better understood as a principle. Christ redefined humanity as a principle by being the second Adam, who once defined the old humanity.⁴⁴

Therefore, the phrase „the body of Jesus Christ in which we together with all of humanity are accepted by God, has now become the foundation of our salvation“ should be understood as follows: The foundation of our salvation is laid by the act of Christ in taking on humanity in the incarnation, which enables a new principle of humanity. This new principle of humanity can be seen in the Church as the body of Christ, in which true believers are included.

Later in the chapter, Bonhoeffer describes that membership of the body of Christ is also bound on the sacraments of baptism and holy communion.⁴⁵ He writes, „baptism is the incorporation into the unity of the body of Christ, while the Lord's supper is the preservation of the fellowship of this body. [...] In the death of baptism, the Holy Spirit appropriated for us what Christ in his body has acquired for all.“⁴⁶ If one is a

⁴¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge* (DBW 4), Gütersloh: GVD, 2015, translation: M. E., 227–239.

⁴²Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 228.

⁴³Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 229.

⁴⁴Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 229.

⁴⁵Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 230.

⁴⁶Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 230.

member of the body of Christ, one is saved. If one is a true believer, he is obligated to show that he has become a member of the body of Christ through the sacraments. However, this does not imply some Roman Catholic sacramental system. Underlying those statements is a clearly Lutheran soteriology. Christ's death has the power to save all human beings. It is acquired for all, but it is not appropriated for everyone. Bonhoeffer writes, „with Christ all humans are par se in the power of becoming human. Jesus does indeed bear the whole of human nature. Thus, his death, life, and resurrection are a real event on all human beings. Christians are with Christ in a special way. What will become death for the others is becoming grace for them.“⁴⁷ This last statement is clearly portraying a dual outcome. Not everybody is a member of Christ's body. Those who are not will not be saved. The idea of Christ being with Christians „in a special way“ alludes to the contrast between verses like 1 Timothy 2,4 and Mark 10,45. Pulling these verses together portrays the idea that Christ's death is sufficient for all, but only efficient for some.

McGarry argues towards the end of his article that „by sidestepping the issue of a ‚dual outcome‘ and simply positively stating his Christology, he never addresses those who willfully place themselves outside the community of faith“.⁴⁸ But, in the contrary, Bonhoeffer does indeed directly address those who are not members of the universal church and therefore outside of the community of faith. He does so mainly in a chapter of his exposition of Matthew 7, which is, ironically, titled *The Great Divorce*.⁴⁹

In this chapter, Bonhoeffer comments on Matthew 7,13–23. Firstly, Bonhoeffer explains the nature of the great separation. He writes:

Not the Church executes the separation, but it has to happen in the appointing word. A small band, the disciples, will in this way be separated from the large number of men. The disciples are few and will always be few. The word of Christ cuts off all of their hopes to be effective. A disciple of Jesus shall never put his trust in numbers. „There are few ...“ [who find the way that leads to life], but there are many of the others and they will always be many. But they all walk towards their ruin.⁵⁰

This last phrase „they all walk towards their ruin“ clearly portrays a dual outcome. There are only few who find the way to life, but those few are not responsible to judge who is among their number. Discipleship is a choice. Those who do not actively follow Jesus Christ are not his disciples and have, therefore, willfully placed themselves outside the community of believers. There are also many who walk towards destruction and do not find the way to life, thus, are not saved. Bonhoeffer

⁴⁷Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 231.

⁴⁸McGarry, apokatastasis (see Fn. 2), 11.

⁴⁹Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 183–190.

⁵⁰Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 184.

even goes one step further and draws the separation line straight through the community of those who claim faith. He argues that not all who profess faith do have the Holy Spirit and are therefore not true members of the Church and not true Christians. He writes:

Saying „Lord, Lord“ is the confession of the Church. Not everyone who speaks this confession will enter in the heavenly kingdom. The divorce will go straight through the confessing Church. The confession does not give a right on Jesus. One day, nobody will be able to rely on his confession. It is not an entitlement before God that we are members of the Church of the right confession. We will not be attain salvation based on this confession. If we do that, we do it out of the sin of Israel, who turned the grace of election into an entitlement before God. In this manner we sin against the grace of the elector. God will not ask us one day whether we have been evangelical, but whether we have done his will. He will ask all in this manner and us, too. The borders of the Church are not the borders of a privilege, but of a graceful choice and election of God.⁵¹

Bonhoeffer makes it very clear. The requirement for salvation is to be a member of the true Church, which is not achieved by any human merit, but is an act of the electing grace of God. Once again, a clear dual outcome is portrayed. He then takes the argument another step further by stating that not even the doing of the will of God assures salvation. He argues that those who do the right deeds but ultimately use them in an attempt to justify themselves before God also do not have the Holy Spirit and are, therefore, also not members of the true Church. Bonhoeffer then asks the final question:

The disciples have to ask where the final benchmark of who will and who will not be accepted by Jesus can be found. Who stays [in the community of faith] and who does not? Jesus' answer to the last discarded group [of pseudo-Christians in Matthew 7] says everything: „I never knew you.“ This then is the secret which is hidden from the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount up to this end. The only question is whether we are known by Jesus or not.⁵²

The dual outcome can once again be clearly found in this passage. He also again refers to God's electing will as defining authority of who will be saved.⁵³ Whether one is saved is a matter of God's predestination of individual human beings. The

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 187f.

⁵² Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 189.

⁵³ The editors of the critical edition of *Nachfolge* state in the footnotes to this passage that the original edition of 1937 listed this specific page under the subject of „predestination“ in the subject index.

only thing that really counts is whether Christ will confess to know a person on the day of judgement.⁵⁴

In summary, Bonhoeffer does indeed comment on the fate of unbelievers in *Discipleship*. He also clearly speaks of a dual outcome in a number of different occasions. Thus, interpretations of the more controversial passages in *Discipleship* that are based on the presupposition that Bonhoeffer affirms universalism also in his later work are not to be preferred. All of those passages can quite easily be understood as affirming a dual outcome. Based on the fact that he affirms the eschatology of a dual outcome at other places in *Discipleship*, one can conclude that the interpretations that promote a dual outcome are to be preferred.

4 *Sermons and drafts from Finkenwalde (1935–1937)*

In the first part of this paper, I discussed Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the universal salvation of all in his early work from 1926 until 1930. His writings from that time are academic in nature and show how Bonhoeffer dealt with the topic of *apokatastasis* from the viewpoint of systematic theology. After that, I showed that Bonhoeffer does indeed teach a dual outcome in his famous book *Discipleship*. I now want to draw attention to a few sermon drafts that Bonhoeffer included in his lectures on homiletics in Finkenwalde, in order to show how he preached certain texts of the Bible that are usually identified to either allude to an eschatology of *apokatastasis* or a dual outcome. In addition to his normal lectures on homiletics, Bonhoeffer also prepared exercises for his students so they could practice what they learned in his lectures.⁵⁵ All of the students had to prepare drafts on certain texts, as well as the exegetical and homiletical preparatory work.⁵⁶ In class, a few students would read their drafts which were then discussed and at the end, Bonhoeffer would present his own draft on the text.⁵⁷ One of the most interesting drafts concerning the question at hand is Bonhoeffer's draft on 1 Cor 1,18, where it says: „For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God“ (1 Cor 1,18 ESV). Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer's own manuscript of that draft has been lost and the modern reader only has access to two sets of notes of two different students. Eberhard Bethge took notes when Bonhoeffer presented his draft to the first class of students in Finkenwalde in 1935 and Gerhard Riemer took stenographical notes in 1936, when Bonhoeffer presented the same draft again to the third class.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 189f.

⁵⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Illegale Theologenausbildung. Finkenwalde 1935–1937* (DBW 14/1–2), Gütersloh: GVD, 2015, translation M. E., 321f.

⁵⁶Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/1 (see Fn. 55), 321f.

⁵⁷Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/1 (see Fn. 55), 322.

⁵⁸Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/1 (see Fn. 55), 329f.

Bethge starts his notes with a presupposition, which Bonhoeffer most likely marked out before he started to present his actual draft. He writes: „Presupposition: There are lost ones and there are saved ones.“⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer then starts his first point of the draft by commenting on that presupposition:

The separation *is* completed. There are lost ones and there are saved ones. Our text counts on that as a given fact, which is frightening and terrible. Humanity *is* cut up. The Church of Christ and the World. Obedience *and* disobedience. Election *and* condemnation. A person can only be one or the other. There is no inbetween. To live under this presupposition gives life a tremendous sharpness, relentlessness, and finality.⁶⁰

Throughout the rest of the draft, Bonhoeffer shows how the cross is indeed a folly to everyone, but it becomes the power of God if one decides to put oneself under the cross and live under it despite the fact that it is a folly to humanity.⁶¹ A Christian must not simply take it for granted that he belongs to the ones that are saved, rather one should acknowledge one's own sinfulness in seeing the cross as a folly, because it is acknowledging one's own lostness that drives one to the cross and to marvel at the fact that he now belongs to those who are saved.⁶² By nature everybody belongs to the world, which means that everybody is lost, but faith will show in the end if one does indeed belong to the Church, the ones that are saved out of that lostness of the world for eternity, because one acknowledged one's lostness and fled to the cross.⁶³ Bonhoeffer's emphasis here on the lostness of all of humanity does not allude to some form of pessimistic universalism, meaning that in order for Christ to renew humanity everybody must be saved, rather he explains the eschatology of a dual outcome by pointing to the separation of the Church and the World. Not everybody will be saved, because not everyone does indeed acknowledge one's own lostness and not everyone does flee to the cross, which would make him or her a part of the Church. This sermon sharply points to the eschatology of a dual outcome. In the end there will still remain a group which is lost for eternity.

Another insightful text is the exercise on 1 Cor 15, 20–28.⁶⁴ In the discussion, Bonhoeffer comments on verse 22, which says: „For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive“ (1 Cor 15,22 ESV). His comment states: „[This verse is] not interested in *that* question, whether *all* will attain salvation. [It rather] testifies

⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/1 (see Fn. 55), 330.

⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/1 (see Fn. 55), 331. When possible, I have added Riemers notes to those of Bethge. Italics found in the original.

⁶¹ DBW 14/1, 331f.

⁶² DBW 14/1, 331f.

⁶³ DBW 14/1, 332.

⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/1 (see Fn. 55), 357–359.

only to the abolition of death, [which applies] in principle to all.”⁶⁵ In his sermon draft on the text, Bonhoeffer later comments also on verse 28, which states: „When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all“ (1 Cor 15,28 ESV). Bonhoeffer writes: „God all in all, does that mean that condemnation is abolished, or that as judge over his enemies, God is also Lord of hell? Nothing is said here about man or the mystery of his outcome, but what is of importance to the Bible: In the end God will be God, Lord over everything.”⁶⁶ If he would indeed hold to the theoretical option of *apokatastasis*, which he said could never be made part of a system, he surely could have interpreted these verses in favor of the idea of *apokatastasis*. The fact that he did not, indicates that he is not interested in proclaiming this idea and does not want his students to do so either.

Fortunately not only drafts, but also complete manuscripts of sermons, which Bonhoeffer preached at Finkenwalde and which were not part of his homiletics class, are preserved until today. One of them, a sermon from November 24, 1935 on Rev 14,6–13, is particularly important for the topic at hand.⁶⁷ Verses nine and ten of this passage state: „[...] If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb“ (Rev 14,9–10 ESV). Commenting on these verses, Bonhoeffer first describes the outcome of the condemned and argues that Christians should not rejoice in their suffering, rather they should be brought to self-examination, confession and repentance.⁶⁸ He then states:

Blessed are the dead – from now on – from such times on, in which the power of Babel and of the beast become overly large – not all the dead are blessed – but those [are,] who die in the Lord, who have kept faith – who have remained at Jesus side until the last hour [...] – the promise of the blessedness of death, the resurrection, exists only for the Church of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹

Bonhoeffer is here clearly teaching the eschatology of a dual outcome. This, however, should drive Christians to prayer that they may die confessing Christ and not that their last hour „may not be a weak one“.⁷⁰ The deep urgency with which Bonhoeffer commends Christians to pray for their perseverance would be neutralized or reversed if he would also preach the universal salvation of all. In conclusion, it can be said that the idea of the universal salvation of all does not appear in Bonhoeffer’s

⁶⁵Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/1 (see Fn. 55), 357. Italics found in the original.

⁶⁶Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/1 (see Fn. 55), 359.

⁶⁷Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/2 (see Fn. 55), 911–918.

⁶⁸Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/2 (see Fn. 55), 916f.

⁶⁹Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/2 (see Fn. 55), 917.

⁷⁰Bonhoeffer, DBW 14/2 (see Fn. 55), 917f.

practical theology and his homiletics. Because it cannot be made into a theological system, it also can never be preached. The dual outcome, on the other hand, must be preached – not in order to scare the listeners, but in order to point them to the cross of Christ, where salvation can be found.⁷¹

5 *From the Prison Cell (1943–1944)*

McGarry and Greggs point to certain passages in Bonhoeffer's later work and argue that he is affirming a belief in the universal salvation of all in those specific passages. They both point to a letter that Bonhoeffer wrote to Eberhard Bethge on December 19, 1943. It is the fourth of advent and Bonhoeffer is expressing a longing to be reunited with his friends. He hopes for a time of peace and rejoices in the fact that Bethge can celebrate Christmas in freedom.⁷² It is important to understand the context of the conversation, which Bonhoeffer is continuing in this letter. One day earlier, he wrote another letter to Bethge, in which he expresses his longing for home, his struggles with the imprisonment, and his way of dealing with those struggles.⁷³ He comments on Ecclesiastes 3,15 and explains that this „verse apparently means that nothing in the past is lost, that God seeks out with us the past that belongs to us to reclaim it. Thus when the longing for something past overtakes us [...] then we can know that this is only one of the many hours that God still has in store for us“. ⁷⁴ Current suffering is a byproduct of a sinful world. God knows all the suffering that one is experiencing and will repay these hours of suffering with hours of blessing. One's suffering in this world is not in vain and one can be comforted by the fact that there is abundant goodness waiting for the believer in eternity. It is not hard to imagine that Bonhoeffer is comforted by such an interpretation. In the letter from the fourth of advent, Bonhoeffer is coming back to this line of thought and is giving it an official theological name. Thinking about a famous lutheran hymn, he writes:

What does that mean, „I will restore it all“?⁷⁵ Nothing is lost; in Christ all things are taken up, preserved, albeit in transfigured form, transparent, clear,

⁷¹Bonhoeffer does warn his students not to scare their listeners in their sermons “with final judgement and death. [It] seems sanctimonious to stir up anxiety” (DBW 14/1, 325). By preaching the dual outcome in this sermon, he does not break his own rule, because his intention is not create anxiety, it rather is an urgent call to flee to Christ.

⁷²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8 (DBWE 8), Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010, 229.

⁷³Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8 (see Fn. 72), 226–229.

⁷⁴Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8 (see Fn. 72), 229.

⁷⁵Bonhoeffer is pondering the famous hymn *Fröhlich soll mein Herze springen* by Paul Gerhardt. A more literal translation of this specific line would be „I will bring it all back“.

liberated from the torment of self-serving demands. Christ brings all this back, indeed, as God intended, without being distorted by sin. The doctrine originating in Eph. 1,10 of the restoration of all things, [...] *re-capitulatio* (Irenaeus), is a magnificent and consummately consoling thought. The verse „God seeks out what has gone by“ is here fulfilled.⁷⁶

Tom Greggs mentions this part of the letter as an occasion where Bonhoeffer affirms universalism. This is probably caused by a close association of Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation with Origen's eschatology of the universal salvation of all. On the other hand, Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation is not directly connected to soteriology. It is rather stating a restoration of God's perfect creation. The renowned patristic scholar Basil Studer argues in his article on recapitulation for the *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* that Irenaeus portrays Christ as the second Adam, a thought in which Bonhoeffer himself indulges in quite heavily in *Sanctorum Communio*, and argues that Christ in the incarnation takes all of human history upon himself and is, thus, completing it.⁷⁷ This does not mean, however, that Irenaeus is affirming the universal salvation of all. He rather focuses mainly on the incarnation and how Christ reunites the „earthly“ and the „spiritual“ when he comments on Ephesians 1,10 directly (*haer.* 5.20.2). Also, Irenaeus clearly argues for an eschatological dual outcome in *adversus haereses* 5.27. The context of Bonhoeffer's letter and of the hymn by Paul Gerhardt also points towards an interpretation of Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation which emphasizes the final restoration of the goodness of creation and not the universal salvation of all. Bonhoeffer is considering the immense amount of suffering that he and his friends are experiencing and he finds comfort in the thought that nothing of this suffering will be in vain and that they will experience true joy when Christ finally restores the full goodness of creation.

McGarry argues that the Christology which underlies those passages in *Discipleship* that point towards universalism can also be found in the works that are written later.⁷⁸ If one does follow McGarry's interpretation of *Discipleship*, one could argue that Bonhoeffer is alluding to an eschatology of *apokatastasis* in those works as well. On the other hand, if one does not follow McGarry's interpretation of those passages in *Discipleship*, the examples from Bonhoeffer's later work do not seem to be alluding to the idea of *apokatastasis* at all.

There is one more text from Bonhoeffer's time in Tegel Prison, however, that is worth to be looked at concerning his opinion on *apokatastasis*, which is the short but dense poem *Christen und Heiden* (Christians and Pagans):

⁷⁶Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8 (see Fn. 72), 229f.

⁷⁷Basil Studer, Recapitulation, in: *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* 3, Downers Grove: IVP, 2014, 383.

⁷⁸McGarry, *apokatastasis* (see Fn. 2), 11. McGarry mentions, in a footnote on page 11, passages from *Ethics* (pages 91–92), *Letters and Papers from Prison* (pages 501–502), and *Conspiracy and Imprisonment* (page 474).

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

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

God goes to every man when sore bestead, Feeds body and spirit with his bread; For Christians, pagans alike he hangs dead, And both alike forgiving.⁷⁹

In this poem, included in a letter to Bethge from July 8, 1944, Bonhoeffer reflects on the effects of Christ's death on the cross for both believers and unbelievers. Sabine Damm reads this poem as „indirectly, but no less persistently showing Bonhoeffer's confidence in the idea of apokatastasis“.⁸⁰ Her focus lies on the last line: „And both alike forgiving.“ She interprets this line as saying that God will in the end save all, both Christians and Pagans, because he has forgiven both of them. But does this poem really force such an interpretation? First of all, this poem needs to be read and interpreted within the context of Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the relationship between religion and Christianity. In another letter to Bethge from July 18, Bonhoeffer explains the poem in that exact context and writes: „The religiosity of man leads him in his need to the power of God in the world [...]. The Bible leads man to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only the suffering God can help.“⁸¹ Then he goes on to write:

The poem about Christians and pagans contains an idea that you will recognize: „Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving“; that is what distinguishes Christians from pagans. Jesus asked in Gethsemane, „Could you not watch with me one hour?“ That is a reversal of what the religious man expects from God.⁸²

The German theologian Bernd Wannenwetsch suggests in his article on the poem that it „would perhaps have been more aptly titled ‚Christians and Other Religious People‘“.⁸³ This would indeed be fitting, because Bonhoeffer does not contrast the Christian with a follower of a particular different religious belief, he rather compares

⁷⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer qtd. in Bernd Wannenwetsch, *Christians and Pagans. Towards a Trans-Religious Second Naivité or How to be a Christological Creature*, in: ders., *Who am I? Bonhoeffer's Theology through His Poetry*, 175–196, translation of this poem by John Bowden, 177.

⁸⁰Sabine Damm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Eine Einführung in sein Denken*, Gütersloh: Kaiser, 2001, 83.

⁸¹Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8 (see Fn. 72), 361.

⁸²Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8 (see Fn. 72), 361.

⁸³Wannenwetsch, *Christians* (see Fn. 79), 178.

the Christian to every other generally religious person, when he states, „Christians stand by God in his grieving“, that distinguishes Christians from pagans.“⁸⁴ If this is now the meaning of the terms „Christian“ and „Pagan“, then what does he mean when he speaks about forgiveness in the last line? Wannenwetsch explains it like this: „In this climactic ending, Bonhoeffer stresses both the need for and the reality of forgiveness as a further commonality between Christians and others.“⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer argues firstly that every human being has a need for salvation and secondly that God offers forgiveness to every human being. Even for pagans, forgiveness is there in Christ, ready to be grasped. Yet, it is important to note that this is not a statement affirming the universal salvation of all. The apostle Paul uses quite similarly thought provoking language in his second letter to the Corinthians: „In Christ God *was reconciling the world to himself*, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation“ (2 Cor 5,19 ESV, emphasis mine). Here, reconciliation is said to have been accomplished for the whole world and yet, Paul goes on to say, „we implore you on behalf of Christ, *be reconciled to God*“ (2 Cor 5,20 ESV, emphasis mine). One can see here that even though Paul just declared reconciliation to have been accomplished, he commands his (Christian!) readers to grasp it for themselves. I believe this to be exactly the point that Bonhoeffer is making at the end of his poem. For Christians and for other religious people, forgiveness has been accomplished on the cross and yet, it still needs to be grasped by the individual. Therefore, this poem does not require to be read as affirming „Bonhoeffer’s confidence in the idea of apokatastasis“. ⁸⁶

6 Conclusion

One can therefore conclude that Bonhoeffer not only excludes the universal salvation of all from his systematic theology, he also excludes it from his practical theology as well. However, a few questions still remain unanswered. Did Bonhoeffer still privately and secretly holding on to his unspeakable hope for the universal salvation of all, even though he does not give it any room in his written work? Why does Bonhoeffer never directly state that he has indeed rejected the eschatology of *apokatastasis*? Examining the broader scope of Bonhoeffer’s work allows for the theory that he is simply not too concerned with the fate of unbelievers. Maybe Bonhoeffer consciously avoided such a statement, because he wanted to leave the judgement of unbelievers to God. The true believer is able to be assured of his own salvation, but he cannot judge whether his neighbor is saved or not. One needs to leave such

⁸⁴Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8 (see Fn. 72), 361.

⁸⁵Wannenwetsch, Christians (see Fn. 79), 178.

⁸⁶Damm, Bonhoeffer (see Fn. 80), 83.

an evaluation to God. On the other hand, as already stated, the true believer is also able to know the fate of those who do not follow Jesus Christ. The dual outcome is, as already explained, clearly affirmed in *Discipleship* and the sermons from Finkenwalde. Furthermore, the true believer is also able to know that not many will be saved.⁸⁷ The one thing that the true believer is not able to know, is whether his neighbor belongs to the few who will be saved, or the many, who will go to eternal damnation. Bonhoeffer leaves it for God's electing grace to determine this distinction, while he emphasizes the believer's responsibility to follow Christ. It is also important to notice that Bonhoeffer's statements on the eternal damnation of those who are not members of the universal Church are quite rare throughout his work. The clearest statements are found in *Discipleship* and a few sermons from Finkenwalde. Bonhoeffer's work from his time at Finkenwalde is very practical and calls the believer to action. Therefore, it is more important for Bonhoeffer to emphasize the call to discipleship for the believer than to comment on the fate of those who do not follow Christ, because the final distinction is only known by God.⁸⁸

When the apostle Peter in John 21,21 wants to know the fate of the apostle John, Jesus does not give him an answer. He simply calls Peter to continued discipleship by stating, „if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!“ (John 21,22 ESV). In the same way the believers ought not to be concerned, whether a person is ultimately predestined for salvation or not. The Scriptures never call the disciples of Christ to make direct judgments towards the eternal destiny of those around them. They are called to evangelism and personal discipleship. Bonhoeffer served a Church that was threatened from the inside, as well as from the outside. His responses to those circumstances and his uncompromising discipleship can help the modern Church worldwide in the struggles of the modern day. Even more than that, especially for the European Church, Bonhoeffer is clearly preparing a way into the future. His well balanced approach to eschatology and his Christ-exalting soteriology serve as an example for a theology that neither abolishes the central truths of the faith, nor remains hidden inside of an ivory tower. He showed the Church today that true discipleship is costly, that community is necessary, that Christ is at work and that theology is not dead, but truly alive, longing to be rediscovered.

Abstract

By chronologically examining a few core passages of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work, first from his academic writings (1926–1930), second from his time of transition from „theologian to Christian“ (1931–1932), third from „Discipleship“ (1935–1937),

⁸⁷Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 184.

⁸⁸Bonhoeffer, DBW 4 (see Fn. 41), 189.

fourth from his sermons at Finkenwalde (1935–1937), and finally from prison writings (1943–1944), this paper argues that Bonhoeffer excluded the idea of apokatastasis, meaning the universal salvation of all, from his systematic and practical theology. If anything, it was for him an unspeakable hope that did not affect his formal teaching.