

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Formation  
Through The Oxford Group**

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**Minor Thesis  
University of Divinity**

Melbourne

7 December, 2020

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## *Preface*

The invitation from Andrew Stallybrass to have this essay published on the ‘For A New World’ web site provides an opportunity make some minor edits<sup>1</sup> and include this new preface.

This thesis examines historical evidence regarding the Swiss Oxford Group’s development and its impact on the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner credited Frank Buchman’s OG movement with reshaping his pastoral practice. Inspired by the OG, Brunner transformed Church-based bible-study groups into teams fostering pastoral conversations as the key to a renewal of individual faith, renewal of the Church community and renewal of ethical relations in the wider secular society. Was Bonhoeffer’s embrace of a similar communal-social approach to pastoral care in part inspired by the Oxford Group?

I respond to this question by focusing on Bonhoeffer’s 1932 Swiss encounter with two individuals: the Anglican priest, loved by Gandhi, C. F. Andrews, and Emil Brunner. In his authoritative biography of Bonhoeffer, Eberhard Bethge described a “*momentous turning point*” when Bonhoeffer’s identity changed from “Theologian to Christian”, a change that became apparent in the second half of 1932.<sup>2</sup> In August 1932, both Andrews and Brunner participated in a Swiss OG meeting at Ermatingen, on the shores of Lake Constance. In the following months both men wrote books which testified to the profound renewal of faith that they experienced at Ermatingen. Bonhoeffer was on hand in Switzerland when these events were taking place. Within days of their Ermatingen experience both Andrews and Brunner met with Bonhoeffer individually and had the opportunity to share their testimonies personally.

Not long after Bonhoeffer’s return to Berlin, a change in his life became evident. He manifested a new piety and simple love for Jesus. The title of an address that he delivered in October of 1932 captured this new spirit: “Sleeper awake! Rise from the dead”.<sup>3</sup> As detailed in this essay Bonhoeffer later credited an unspecified pastoral conversation with shaking him up and waking him from his slumbers. I argue that Bonhoeffer’s post-Ermatingen pastoral conversations with Andrews and Brunner coincided, in both content and timeline, with his 1932 transition from “Theologian to Christian”. These conversations solve the puzzle of as to why Bonhoeffer endorsed the effectiveness, and displayed an intimate appreciation, of the OG approach to pastoral conversations.

A final caveat. Consideration of these formative beginnings in no way undermines the importance of Bonhoeffer’s earlier encounters, or the message of his later works. His faith journey and the workings of God’s grace embraced the entirety of his life, just as God’s mandates and grace embrace the entirety of our world. However, turning points are turning points. Bonhoeffer’s life took a turn when his life was changed by a specific pastoral conversation with another Christian: a conversation that released him from his theological ambitions and led him to Christ. For Bonhoeffer, faith and action are bound

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<sup>1</sup> The only significant change, per the suggestion of Peter Thwaites, is that I have inserted original German quotations (alongside my translations) in the body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> My italics. Bethge described Bonhoeffer’s change under the heading of “The Transition from Theologian to Christian.” While he stresses Bonhoeffer’s profound aversion to speaking about personal “conversions” and beginnings “that neither can nor should be known” he concedes that Bonhoeffer nevertheless clearly experienced a conversion-like event (EB-DB:202-06).

<sup>3</sup> (DBWE 3, 153-54).

together in belief and obedience to a living Christ. Bonhoeffer challenges us to seek Christ in the stillness within and find his life-renewing significance for our situation and relations. Bonhoeffer's change was not a singular turning point, but one he sought to renew each day. This is also his invitation to us.

Lastly, I would like to thank those who have helped bring this work to its current state. I am particularly grateful to the individuals who read earlier copies of this essay and passed on suggestions and expressed appreciation for my efforts. My thanks and apologies for the shortcomings that the completed work still retains. A special thanks to my supervisor, Professor John Flett, of Pilgrim College, who pushed me to sharpen the focus of this essay and suggested its current title. Special thanks also to Professor Frank Jehle whose study of Brunner was pivotal to this essay, and whose insight and comments have been greatly valued. Above all, my thanks and appreciation to my wife for her lively challenges and patient support.

Andrew Dawson

Melbourne, September 4, 2021.

## List of Abbreviations

Eberhard Bethge's biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is cited as:

EB-DB. Bethge, Eberhard, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Edited by Victoria J. Barnett. Translated By Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel under Editorship of Edwin Robertson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Bibliographical details of the volumes of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, general editors Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., Victoria Barnett, Barbara Wojhoski (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996–2014) in English (hereafter cited as DBWE) are as follows:

DBWE 1. *Sanctorum Communio*. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

DBWE 3. *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*. Edited by John W. de Gruchy. Translated by Douglas Stephen Bax. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

DBWE 4. *Discipleship*. Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey. Translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

DBWE 5. *Life Together [and] Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*. Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly. Translated by Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

DBWE 6. *Ethics*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss, Charles West and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

DBWE 10. *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928–1931*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

DBWE 11. *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, Mark S. Brocker and Michael Lukens, trans. Anne Schmidt-Lange, Isabel Best, Nicolas Humphrey, Marion Pauck and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

- DBWE 12. *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.
- DBWE 13. *London: 1933–1935*, ed. Keith Clements, trans. Isabel Best. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.
- DBWE 14. *Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935–1937*, ed. H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brocker, trans. Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.
- DBWE 15. *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Victoria J. Barnett, Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick, Scott A. Moore and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.
- DBWE 16. *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*, ed. Mark S. Brocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.
- LPP. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. LPP Translated by Reginald Fuller and Frank Clark. N. York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	7
2. Establishing a Prima Facie Case for the Thesis That ‘Bonhoeffer’s Pastoral Practice Was Positively Influenced by the Oxford Group’ .....	11
3. In Bonhoeffer’s Own Words .....	16
4. The Oxford Group Revival in Switzerland as the Context of Bonhoeffer's Positive Introduction to the Oxford Group .....	19
5. Ermatingen and Bonhoeffer’s First Meeting with Brunner.....	29
6. Bonhoeffer’s ‘Change’ and Its Consequences .....	34
7. Speaking With One Voice: Brunner’s and Bonhoeffer’s Message to the Church on the Nature of Discipleship.....	39
8. Conclusion.....	46
Bibliography.....	51

# 1. Introduction

This essay questions the received history regarding the influence of Frank Buchman's Oxford Group movement on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's pastoral practice. It focuses on Bonhoeffer's positive remarks about confessional conversations, and his suggestion that the Oxford Group provides an effective model of how to conduct a life-renewing pastoral conversation. Such a conversation centres on reading scripture, listening in silence for God's personal word, and confessional sharing of concrete sins. From late 1932, these spiritual disciplines played a central role in Bonhoeffer's personal life and approach to pastoral practice. On a few occasions in Bonhoeffer's lectures and writings he specifically linked these spiritual practices to the pastoral approach of the Oxford Group.

The orthodox response in Bonhoeffer studies is to ignore or explain away Bonhoeffer's positive references to the Oxford Group. Bethge's definitive biography of Bonhoeffer makes no mention of any positive Oxford Group influence on Bonhoeffer's pastoral practices; on the contrary, he reports that Bonhoeffer "was incensed" by the Oxford Group pastoral approach and "found the Oxford movement's demand for 'change' very disturbing."<sup>4</sup> The widespread acceptance of Bethge's views is evident in the absence of any book or article in the English-speaking world questioning Bethge's assertions.<sup>5</sup> However since the new millennium two German publications have challenged this consensus.

In 2006 the theologian Peter Zimmerling, writing in his book *Bonhoeffer als Praktischer Theologe*, advanced the thesis that "Bonhoeffer received certain concerns of the group movement quite positively."<sup>6</sup> Zimmerling observed that the two works written after Bonhoeffer's "conversion" to a pastorally oriented form of Christianity, *Discipleship* and *Life Together* had a decidedly pietistic flavour, and suggests that one source of this influence was

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<sup>4</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 470. Henceforth, cited as EB-DB.

<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer's positive regard for Oxford Group pastoral practices is expressed in his own words within his collected works. However, the editors typically add footnotes explaining away any seeming positive connotations. For example: "Buchmann [sic] started the Oxford Group movement, a group that Bonhoeffer was critical of because of his concern that the majority of Christians who belonged neither to the German Christians nor to the Confessing Church would follow it.— HGB (H. Gaylon Barker – ed.)." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935–1937* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 272fn.13. Hereafter DBWE 14.

<sup>6</sup> „Bonhoeffer hat bestimmte Anliegen der Gruppenbewegung durchaus positiv aufgenommen“, in Peter Zimmerling *Bonhoeffer als Praktischer Theologe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 187 [my translation].

the Oxford Group.<sup>7</sup> Zimmerling notes that Bonhoeffer demonstrated his familiarity and approval of some Group practices, “above all” by the role of the Oxford Group in bringing people to a “conscious decision for Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

In his 2017 dissertation, *Charismatische Spiritualität und Seelsorge: Der Volksmissionskreis Sachsen bis 1990*,<sup>9</sup> Markus Schmidt builds upon Zimmerling’s observations and argues that Bonhoeffer adopted Gerhard Füllkrug’s Oxford Group<sup>10</sup> understanding of pastoral care<sup>11</sup>, and that at “the Finkenwalde People’s Missions Bonhoeffer followed the example of the Group Movement conveyed by Füllkrug.”<sup>12</sup> Schmidt claims that although removed from Buchman’s movement, Bonhoeffer’s vision of community spiritual renewal as practiced at Finkenwalde<sup>13</sup> was deeply indebted to the life-changing role of personal confession as practiced by the Oxford Group. Schmidt acknowledges that Bonhoeffer criticized the Oxford Group but argues that “its group dynamic approach was passed on and anchored outside the actual group movement, namely within the BK (Confessing Church)” and that in “this respect the Oxford Group Movement played an essential role in the pastoral care of the BK during the church struggle”.<sup>14</sup>

Schmidt therefore acknowledges the conflict between Bonhoeffer and the OG but argues that the Bonhoeffer appropriated the OG’s dynamic lay-group approach to pastoral care, with its focus on confessional pastoral conversations. Quoting Füllkrug, Schmidt identifies the key role of confession in the group approach:

»Die Gruppenbewegung lehrt uns folgendes: Die Beichte ist nicht bloß vor dem Pastor möglich, sondern vor jedem gereiften Christen. Jede Aussprache befreit den Menschen. Das Bekenntnis des einen macht dem andern Mut, auch seine eigene Sünde zu bekennen.«

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Zimmerling, “Bonhoeffer und der Pietismus,” *Theologische Beiträge* 37, (2006): 246–261.

<sup>8</sup> Zimmerling, “Bonhoeffer und der Pietismus”: 246–261.

<sup>9</sup> Markus Schmidt, *Charismatische Spiritualität und Seelsorge: Der Volksmissionskreis Sachsen bis 1990* (Göttingen: Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Unipress, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> See Gerhard Füllkrug, *Seelsorge* (Schwerin: Friedrich Bahn, 1933).

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt writes that “Gerhard Füllkrug interprets the Oxford group movement as ‘a new form of pastoral care’” and that along with Emil Brunner and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Füllkrug “sees the missionary potential of Oxford pastoral care in group events and its pastoral dynamics” (my translation) Schmidt, *Charismatische Spiritualität und Seelsorge*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> „Bei den Finkenwalder Volksmissionen folgte Bonhoeffer dem von Füllkrug vermittelten Vorbild der Gruppenbewegung.” Schmidt, *Charismatische Spiritualität und Seelsorge*, 71 [my translation].

<sup>13</sup> As practiced at Finkenwalde and outlined in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together [and] Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). Henceforth, DBWE 5.

<sup>14</sup> „Insofern spielt die Oxford-Gruppenbewegung für die Seelsorge der BK während des Kirchenkampfes eine wesentliche Rolle, als dass ihr gruppenspezifischer Ansatz auch außerhalb der eigentlichen Gruppenbewegung, nämlich innerhalb der BK tradiert und verankert wurde.” Schmidt, *Charismatische Spiritualität und Seelsorge*, 72 [my translation].



[The Group Movement teaches us the following: Confession is not only possible in front of the pastor, but in front of every mature Christian. Every pronunciation frees people. The confession of one gives the other the courage to confess one's own sin.]<sup>15</sup>

Schmidt concludes that:

Es wird deutlich, dass Bonhoeffer als Vertreter der Bekennenden Kirche [BK] das Konzept der Volksmission in der von Füllkrug mit [Oxford] gruppenspezifischen Merkmalen angereicherten Form praktizierte und an künftige BK-Pfarrer vermittelte. Dabei stellt sich der volksmissionarische Ruf »zur Verantwortung« als ein Mittel der generellen Seelsorge dar [...]. Zugleich erweist sich diese volksmissionarische Seelsorge als Mittel im Kirchenkampf, durch Gruppengestalten die BK zu stärken.

[It becomes clear that Bonhoeffer, as a representative of the Confessing Church [BK], practiced the concept of the people's mission in the form that Füllkrug enriched with [Oxford] group dynamic characteristics and conveyed it to future BK pastors. Thereby the popular missionary call "to responsibility" is presented as a means of general pastoral care [...]. At the same time, this lay missionary pastoral care proves to be a means in the church struggle to strengthen the BK through the formation of groups.]<sup>16</sup>

Zimmerling notes that Bonhoeffer improved his understanding of the Oxford Group during his time in England. While this is true, I have found little evidence to suggest that Bonhoeffer's conversations with English supporters of the Oxford Group had a positive impact on his assessment of the Oxford Group and its pastoral practices.<sup>17</sup>

My thesis is that direct and indirect contact with Brunner and his Swiss friends mediated Bonhoeffer's positive encounter with the Oxford Group. The first section of this essay introduces the Oxford Group and establishes a prima facie case that Bonhoeffer was positively influenced by the Oxford Group approach to pastoral conversations. The subsequent section

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<sup>15</sup> Füllkrug *Seelsorge*, quoted in Schmidt, *Charismatische Spiritualität und Seelsorge*, 68 [my translation].

<sup>16</sup> Schmidt, *Charismatische Spiritualität und Seelsorge*, 72 [my translation].

<sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer clearly studied the Oxford Group while in England, both through reading its literature and by attending at least one conference. In his Finkenwalde seminary lectures he used the English Oxford Group terminology, such as 'guidance', 'sharing', etc. when discussing group practices (see DBWE 14, 522). In a rare record of Bonhoeffer's English Oxford Group encounters, Bonhoeffer's student and friend, Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, recalls:

Er [Bonhoeffer] war zu einer Tagung der „Oxford-Bewegung“ (später wurde bei uns ein Ableger als „Moralische Aufrüstung“ bekannt) in den Süden Englands gereist. Die Tagung selbst war für ihn nicht sehr ergiebig. Doch amüsiert berichtete er, wie ihn ein engagierter Teilnehmer gefragt hatte: „How many lifes did you change?“ (Wie viele Menschen hast du bekehrt?) Bonhoeffers Antwort: „Keinen, das ist nicht meine Aufgabe.“ Der Fragesteller war verblüfft und irritiert. Mit dieser Antwort konnte er nichts anfangen, was Bonhoeffer wohl auch erreichen wollte.

[He [Bonhoeffer] had traveled to the south of England for a meeting of the "Oxford Movement" (later known to us as "Moral ReArmament"). The conference itself was not very productive for him. But with amusement he reported how a committed participant had asked him: "How many lifes did you change?" (How many people did you convert?) Bonhoeffer's answer: "None, that's not my job." The questioner was amazed and confused. With this answer he could not do anything, and that was probably what Bonhoeffer wanted to achieve.]

Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, *Wir nannten ihn Bruder Bonhoeffer: Einblicke in ein hoffnungsvolles Leben*, (Berlin: Wichern-Verlag, 2004), 52. [my translation].

The anecdote is revealing, in that it centres on the failure, in Bonhoeffer's mind, of the Anglo-Saxon Oxford Group supporters to exercise theological clarity. In Bonhoeffer's mind, real spiritual change is due solely to Christ, as is stressed in his introductory chapter in *Life Together*. Zimmerling states that "Bonhoeffer obviously got to know the movement in England *better*," [my emphasis] which leaves unanswered the question as to how he formed his initial understanding. Zimmerling, *Bonhoeffer als Praktischer Theologe*, 72fn.54.

details Bonhoeffer's 1932 meeting with advocates of the Oxford Group in Switzerland. At the very least these Swiss contacts provided Bonhoeffer with a trusted source of information about the effectiveness of Oxford Group style pastoral practices. The final section reviews some of the textual evidence of the close linkages between Brunner's and Bonhoeffer's pastoral approach. The essay concludes that there is significant evidence of a Swiss Oxford Group influence in the development of Bonhoeffer's theology of pastoral practice.

## 2. Establishing a Prima Facie Case for the Thesis That ‘Bonhoeffer’s Pastoral Practice Was Positively Influenced by the Oxford Group’

Although little known today, Frank Buchman’s “Oxford Group” entered the public scene in 1928 and by 1938 was receiving far more attention in British books than the Protestant theological giant of his day, Karl Barth.<sup>18</sup> In other nations a similar spike in attention occurred. Writing in 1934, Henry Van Dusen, one of Bonhoeffer’s lecturers at New York’s Union Seminary, described the emergence of the Oxford Group Movement as “the most striking spiritual phenomenon of our time,” and suggested that in “personality and influence” Frank Buchman “deserves classification” with not just Karl Barth, but political leaders such as “Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler, Roosevelt.”<sup>19</sup>

Martin Sallmann, a Swiss historian, stated that, although “it is almost forgotten today as an episode of church history,” the Oxford Group provoked an “astonishing response . . . not only in Switzerland, but throughout Europe.”<sup>20</sup> The church historian, Ian Randall, has described the “enormous impact made by the Oxford Group in the 1930s” within Europe as “an example of the way in which Christianity in Europe has been capable of renewed mission.”<sup>21</sup> Sallmann’s and Randall’s observations are supported by the Swiss theologian Frank Jehle. Jehle observes that Europe was hungry for the message of the Oxford Group:

Beispielsweise in den Niederlanden mussten Extrazüge organisiert werden, weil so viele Leute Buchman und sein Team hören wollten. Und auf «Einladung des Präsidenten des norwegischen Parlamentes» wurde ihm und «seiner Mannschaft [...] die Gelegenheit gegeben, einen grossen Teil der norwegischen Bevölkerung zu erreichen». [...] Die Oxford-Gruppenbewegung fand auch in der Schweiz einen grossen Zulauf. Bundespräsident Rudolf Minger begrüßte Buchman und 250 seiner Mitarbeiter persönlich. Für ein Einladungsschreiben zu verschiedenen Gruppenanlässen schrieb er das Grusswort. «Wie auch in Skandinavien waren die Säle [...] bis zum letzten Platz gefüllt.»

[For example, in the Netherlands extra trains had to be organized because so many people wanted to hear Buchman and his team. And at the “invitation of the President of the Norwegian Parliament” he and “his team . . . were given the opportunity to reach a large part of the Norwegian population.” . . . In Switzerland, Federal President Rudolf Minger personally welcomed Buchman and 250 of his workers.

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<sup>18</sup> In 1938 the term “Oxford Group” was referred to three times more frequently than “Karl Barth” in British books. For a visual depiction of this spike in public interest see Google Books Ngram Viewer: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Karl+Barth%2COxford+Group&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2019&corpus=29&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Karl+Barth%2COxford+Group&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=29&smoothing=3)

<sup>19</sup> Henry P. Van Dusen, “Apostle to the Twentieth Century. Frank N. D. Buchman: Founder of the Oxford Group Movement,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 154, no. 1 (July 1934): 3, 16.

<sup>20</sup> My translation; Martin Sallmann’s work is the first impartial study of the impact of the Oxford Group on Switzerland in the 1930s. Martin Sallmann, “Umstrittene Erweckung: Die Oxfordgruppe in der Schweiz (1932—1938),” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 65, no. 1 (2009): 3, 14.

<sup>21</sup> I. M. Randall, “‘We All Need Constant Change’: The Oxford Group and Mission in Europe in the 1930s,” *European Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (2000): 174.

He wrote the greeting for an invitation letter to various group events. “As in Scandinavia the halls were filled to the last seat.”<sup>22</sup>

Although a Lutheran, Buchman’s spiritual mission was rooted in specific spiritual practices that David Bebbington has argued reshaped evangelical spirituality and pastoral practice to reflect the twentieth century cultural mood “variously called ‘Modernism’ or ‘Expressivism’.”<sup>23</sup> In Randall’s words, “Buchman's approach to the reshaping of evangelical spirituality can be traced: life-changing at an individual level; the building of open relationships within teams; a community of people surrendered entirely to God; confession or 'sharing' of sins and failures, and direct divine guidance.”<sup>24</sup> In the space of a few years these new spiritual practices and pastoral methods were being talked about and practiced by many groups across Europe.

Randall notes that for the Oxford Group, conversion (‘life-changing’) was not just a private matter; the private and the public, the local and global domains were interwoven. Individual change was viewed as the key to rebuilding trust between nations. This was the message in 1933 when Carl Hambro, Norwegian President and twice President of the League of Nations, told an audience in Geneva that Buchman’s vision of ‘life-changing’, “was more important than most of the subjects on the agenda of the League of Nations.”<sup>25</sup>

As the decade progressed, Hitler’s militarization of Germany and aggressive political demands increased the fear of war and created a fertile environment for the Oxford Group’s message of peace. Group literature, translated into nine languages, flooded the European book market. Germany was a focus of Buchman’s efforts. As Bonhoeffer observed to his Swiss friend Erwin Sutz in 1936, the German “book market is displaying a whole mountain of group literature,” and people “are hungry for a ‘Christian’ movement, and for the committees this has become almost a question of existence,” such that:

Everyone in the middle of the church spectrum, including the church committees, has become infatuated and started flirting with this non-political, lively phenomenon.<sup>26</sup>

From the summer of 1932 onwards, within the leadership of the Swiss inspired dialectical theological movement, the Oxford Group became a focus of attention. By the end

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<sup>22</sup> Frank Jehle, *Emil Brunner: Theologe im 20. Jahrhundert*. (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2006), 273-74 [my translation].

<sup>23</sup> Bebbington argues that the Oxford Group was the “leading embodiment” in religion of Cultural Modernism, and that the Buchmanites “displayed many of the most typical characteristics of the period’s cultural pioneers.” David W. Bebbington, “Evangelicalism and British Culture,” *Perichoresis* 6, no. 2 (2008): 148-49.

<sup>24</sup> Randall, “We All Need Constant Change,” 175.

<sup>25</sup> Randall, “We All Need Constant Change,” 174.

<sup>26</sup> DBWE 14: 267.

of 1933 Brunner was outspoken in his advocacy for the Oxford Group, Barth had become passionate in his denunciation of the Group, while Thurneysen attempted to mediate.<sup>27</sup> Thurneysen's comments about the Oxford Group, from his contribution to the 1933 debate over the Oxford Group practice of seeking "guidance"<sup>28</sup> through to his 1946 reflections on the Oxford approach to pastoral care, provide a non-partisan estimation of the theological significance of the Swiss Oxford Group.

Thurneysen summed up the impact of the Swiss Oxford Group's pastoral innovations in *Die Lehre von der Seelsorge*, a theological study of the Protestant Church's approach to pastoral care.<sup>29</sup> In a chapter that focused on the Oxford Group's conversational approach to personal confession, Thurneysen acknowledges that the Oxford Group is "a genuine movement of pastoral care with a new message for sinners" and "the movement indeed did and still does achieve genuine deliverance for some persons in the bondage of sin."<sup>30</sup> He states that the Oxford Group had "shaken-up" the Swiss Church; it had "struck a new note and brought a change" to a Church that previously burdened, rather than liberated its members, with a message of "forgiveness of sins."<sup>31</sup>

Thurneysen observes that for many people "the movement has for the first time revealed that faith can be a power grasping and liberating man's life" and that "possibly these people have never been really touched by the ordinary Christian preaching and pastoral care in the church."<sup>32</sup> The impact of the Group in Switzerland was such that by 1935 C.J. Jung, the Swiss psychologist, was calling the Oxford Group's new approach to personal confession a therapeutic breakthrough for Protestant religion.<sup>33</sup> Jung encouraged some of his patients to

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<sup>27</sup> Publication of the correspondence between Barth, Thurneysen and Brunner has revealed the central role played by the Oxford Group in the development of these relationships. The works of Hart and Jehle provide a good summary of the role of the Oxford Group in this development. John W. Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner. The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance*, (New York: Peter Lang 2001), Jehle, *Emil Brunner*.

<sup>28</sup> A special edition of the World's Student Christian Federation magazine edited by Bonhoeffer's friend, W. A. Visser't Hooft devoted to the Oxford Group idea that it is possible to seek the will of God and lead a "guided" life. Contributors included H.P. Van Dusen, David Cairns and Eduard Thurneysen. Thurneysen aligns his own position on guidance with Brunner, but is critical of Buchman's Anglo-Saxon position. See Eduard Thurneysen, "Guidance," *The Student World* 26, no. 4 (1933): 294-209.

<sup>29</sup> Eduard Thurneysen, *Die Lehre von der Seelsorge* (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946). Translated into English as: *A Theology of Pastoral Care* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1962). See chapter 8, "The Content of Pastoral Conversation," 147-178.

<sup>30</sup> Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, 172.

<sup>31</sup> Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, 172.

<sup>32</sup> Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, 175.

<sup>33</sup> The twelve-step self-help group therapy movement traces its origins back to Alcoholics Anonymous and the Oxford Group. Jung played a part in this development by referring alcoholics to the Group. For example, in a 1935 lecture in Zurich, Jung stated: "In treating devout Catholics, I always refer them to the Church's confessional and its means of grace. It is more difficult in the case of Protestants, who must do without confession and absolution. The more modern type of Protestantism has, however, the safety valve of the Oxford

seek help with the movement, and testified to seeing “very serious cases” of alcoholic addiction “cured by those means – that is a fact!”<sup>34</sup>

However, for Thurneysen confession was more than a therapeutic innovation: it had profound theological significance. At the heart of the Group’s success, Thurneysen states, was a pastoral conversation in which “one man encounters another with the message of grace in a conversation under the Word of God and is able to bring to the light of forgiveness the evil secrets weighing upon the fellow man.”<sup>35</sup> Theologically, such a conversation is the path to an encounter with the living Christ and the reality of God’s forgiveness and love. Hence, in his chapter on the content of true pastoral care, Thurneysen concludes that “the church has every reason to be shaken up” by the Group and “must no longer neglect and set aside the central position given to the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>36</sup> The Church, he concludes, needs a new awakening:

This new awakening must not and will not be the exclusive affair of its theologians and pastors. But it must and will—in this the church has to learn from Moral Re-Armament [Oxford Group]<sup>37</sup>—shake and penetrate the local congregations and their members in the form of a pastoral care occurring among them from person to person.<sup>38</sup>

Thurneysen had observed the Oxford Group inspired pastoral revival at first hand.<sup>39</sup> His insight and understanding of the Oxford Group approach to pastoral renewal came from his close friendship with Brunner, and pastors close to Brunner, such as Bonhoeffer’s friend and confidant, Erwin Sutz. The Oxford Group had then an outsized influence within the Swiss church and inspired private and public conversations between dialectical theologians that Bonhoeffer respected and studied closely. Bonhoeffer personally met, through Sutz, Barth and

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Group movement, which prescribes lay confession as a substitute, and group experience instead of absolution. A number of my patients have joined this movement with my entire approval, just as others have become Catholics, or at least better Catholics than they were before.” Jung, C. J. “Principles of Practical Psychology” (1935), in C.G. Jung *The Practice of Psychotherapy: Essays on the Psychology of the Transference and other subjects. Second Edition*, Eds. M. Fordham, & G. Adler; trans. from the German by R.F.C. Hull, (London: Routledge, 1966), (CGJ-CW 16): 16.

<sup>34</sup> C. G. Jung, *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 18: The Symbolic Life* (New York, NY: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), (CGJ-CW 18): 273. AA literatures like to refer to Jung’s endorsement of Oxford Group methods, quoting his statement “a member of the Oxford Group comes to me in order to get treatment, I say, ‘You are in the Oxford Group; so long as you are there, you settle your affair with the Oxford Group. I can’t do it better than Jesus.’” (CGJ-CW 18: 272)

<sup>35</sup> Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, 172.

<sup>36</sup> Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, 175.

<sup>37</sup> The Oxford Group was renamed Moral Re-Armament in 1938. It has since been renamed Initiatives of Change. See Daniel Sack for an overview of the movement’s name changing: Daniel Sack, *Moral Re-Armament: The Reinventions of an American Religious Movement* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, 175.

<sup>39</sup> Brunner claims that many thousands of Swiss were brought back to the Church through the Oxford Group. See Hart, *Barth vs Brunner*, chapter 6, and Jehle, *Emil Brunner, 273-92*.

Brunner, the two figures at the heart of the dialectical theology movement and of the debate provoked by the Oxford Group.<sup>40</sup> This personal and public access to and participation in these Swiss conversations was the principal basis for Bonhoeffer's positive understanding of the pastoral potential of the Oxford Group.

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<sup>40</sup> Bonhoeffer remarked in a letter to Sutz (October 8, 1931) that he had not at that stage met Thurneysen. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, Mark S. Brocker and Michael Lukens, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 49. Hereafter DBWE 11. I am not aware of personal meetings between them, but it is clear that he recognized Thurneysen's theological stature and place within the dialectical theology community.

### 3. In Bonhoeffer's Own Words

Bonhoeffer arrived at a conviction similar to that of Thurneysen: he believed that the Oxford Group represented the rediscovery of the Church's authentic pastoral mission. He described its primary mission as leading lost souls to new life. Bonhoeffer ascertained that it had some successes in this regard, but also insisted that it was in grave danger of betraying this mission. As Bonhoeffer stated in a lecture to his Finkenwalde students:

Since one of the most important objections to sermons today is that they are incapable of really leading a person to life, one of the primary elements of a sermon must be to witness to the living Christ. *This is the duty of pastoral love; the correct concern of the Group Movement* here, within this framework and these limitations. But never such that my own inner life is mistaken for the one who is actually life itself, namely, Christ.<sup>41</sup> (my italics)

The positive significance of the Oxford Group lay in a specific mode of expressing 'pastoral love'. Bonhoeffer's concrete interpretation of pastoral love transformed the message of dialectical theology into theological practice; the Oxford Group (correctly understood) taught students how to transform the abstract recipe of Christ's saving presence into concrete reality.<sup>42</sup> For example, in lectures at Finkenwalde Bonhoeffer taught his seminarians that:

The path of pastoral care . . . leads from advice to commandment, from a confession of distress to a shared confession of sin, from conversation to mutual listening to God's promise..... One must traverse this path. . . . [Walking this path with the] educated [is] [e]specially difficult. .... Characterizing feature: in individualization of religious matters, and an intellectualizing, both of which are related. Special needs of such people: being alone and reflection. Two possibilities for the conversation: *work of the Oxford Group, especially with the educated, successful. Address the educated on the other side of reflection. Simple, direct witness of community and of childlike faith.*<sup>43</sup> (my italics)

Bonhoeffer's own words suggest that he regarded the Oxford Group approach to personal confession as exemplary in its capacity to lead the intellectual back to a living relationship with Christ. Like Thurneysen, Bonhoeffer traced the development of confessional practice in the Protestant Church from its early beginnings, through to Luther's endorsement, to its decline, and revival in the form of the Oxford Group's "face to face" approach.<sup>44</sup> This practice, grounded in an adequate theological understanding, was at the heart of Bonhoeffer's message to his seminary students. As noted by a 1936 seminarian during one of Bonhoeffer's

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<sup>41</sup> DBWE 14: 521-22.

<sup>42</sup> Brunner's views will be discussed in the Swiss section of this essay.

<sup>43</sup> DBWE 14: 566, 580-1.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Bonhoeffer's reference to the Oxford Group in his "Lectures on Personal Confession" (these lectures were repeated in successive years); fn.28. identifies this particular reference to notes taken by a student in 1938-9 lectures on pastoral care, DBWE 14: 750. Other student notes indicate Bonhoeffer discussing the Oxford Group approach to pastoral care in 1936-37 lectures, DBWE 14: 581.



lectures: “Personal Confession Heart of pastoral care. Admonishment to be a Christian = admonishment to go to personal confession.”<sup>45</sup>

Bonhoeffer, like Thurneysen and Brunner, believed that the Church needed to learn from the Oxford Group’s pastoral approach, and at the same time, believed that the Oxford Group needed to learn from dialectical theology.<sup>46</sup> Like Brunner, he was critical of Buchman’s failure to grasp the importance of theology. This is reflected in Bonhoeffer’s final remarks on this subject in 1944, when Bonhoeffer maintained that of various initiatives to bring new life to the Church “the Oxford Group would have the best chance if they were not so completely without biblical substance.”<sup>47</sup> This reference to biblical substance points to Bonhoeffer’s stress on the importance of understanding the theological significance of personal confession.

For Bonhoeffer, the life-changing event must be understood in the context of a Christ-centred understanding of sin and salvation.<sup>48</sup> In a recent dissertation that surveyed Bonhoeffer’s approach to personal confession, Nicola Wilkes argued that theologically, confession is at the heart of Bonhoeffer’s Christology. Confession is the reversal of the fall: “when the fallen human being exposes her shame and gives a concrete confession, in so doing, she comes out of spiritual death and into life, out of isolation and into Christ and community.”<sup>49</sup> In practical pastoral terms, confession is “predicated on speech and silence, hearing and responding. The transition from death to life is effected through the dialectic of speaking and listening and of exposure and reclothing.”<sup>50</sup> It is with respect to this latter

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<sup>45</sup> DBWE 14: 592.

<sup>46</sup> Brunner describes dialectical theology as “two great movements” that desperately need each other, with himself playing the “the double task” as “interpreter on both sides, to interpret the Group Movement to the theologians and churchmen, and to interpret theology and Church to the Group Movement, so that the one side can know the other as its necessary correlate.” Brunner, *The Church and the Oxford Group*, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Bonhoeffer to Bethge, June 8<sup>th</sup> 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 328. Hereafter LPP.

<sup>48</sup> Clifford Green shows that Bonhoeffer’s understanding of sin and salvation was rooted in a social relational view of Christ, as initially developed in *Sanctorum Communio* (DBWE 1). Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, Revised Edition, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 49-57. Green acknowledges a deep continuity in Bonhoeffer’s theology. John Godsey suggests that that Bonhoeffer’s Christological theology develops through three phases; Christ as revelational reality of the Church, Christ as Lord over the Church, and Christ as Lord over the World. However, the first phase frames the second, and likewise the theology of “the accumulated wisdom of both [prior] periods is present in the third.” Thus there is an underlying continuity in Bonhoeffer’s theology, and it is this theology that frames his understanding of the pastoral encounter, and the reconciliation between the sinner and Christ that it can mediate. John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 255-56, 266-8.

<sup>49</sup> Nicola Wilkes, “Private Confession of Sin in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” (Ph.D., University of Cambridge, 2015), 138.

<sup>50</sup> Nicola J. Wilkes, “Life and Health: Bonhoeffer’s Normative and Divergent Accounts of Private Confession of Sin,” *Theology Today* 71, no.1 (2014): 61.

practical aspect of how to conduct a conversation that Bonhoeffer recommends learning from the Oxford Group's practice.

Bonhoeffer's practical appreciation of the Oxford Group is indicated in the title of the 1936/37 lecture devoted largely to the Group: "The *How* of evangelization." In this lecture he indicates that "leading a person to life" (i.e., to Christ; in Group terms, "life-changing") is the principle task of Oxford Group evangelization.<sup>51</sup> Confession mediates this change. In Bonhoeffer's words, as a result of confession the sinner is released from their shackles:

In confession there takes place a *breakthrough to community* ..... Now the community bears the sin of the individual believer, who is no longer alone with this evil but has "cast off" this sin by confessing it and handing it over to God. The sinner has been relieved of sin's burden. Now the sinner stands in the community of sinners who live by the grace of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. Now one is allowed to be a sinner and still enjoy the grace of God. We can admit our sins and in this very act find community for the first time. . . . In confession there occurs a *breakthrough to new life*..... Confession before one another is given to us by God so that we may be assured of divine forgiveness. But it is precisely for the sake of this assurance that confession is about admitting *concrete* sins. .... Who can give us the assurance that we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins? God gives us this assurance through one another. The other believer breaks the circle of self-deception [Italics in original].<sup>52</sup>

Bonhoeffer's own positive remarks establish the case for investigating the Oxford Group influence in his thinking. There is a sufficient *prima facie* case for taking seriously the possibility that Bonhoeffer, like Thurneysen and Brunner, was inspired by the Oxford Group's pastoral practices – especially his belief that an Oxford Group style of confession of concrete personal sins to a brother or sister in Christ provides a model of the way we find new life and fellowship in Christ. Yet, it is also the case that Bonhoeffer's engaged in scathing criticism of Buchman and of characteristics that he, like Thurneysen and Brunner, identified with Buchman's dominant Anglo-Saxon theological wing of the Oxford Group. To understand the complex tensions informing Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Oxford Group it is necessary to trace his encounter with the Swiss Group from its formation in the middle of 1932.

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<sup>51</sup> DBWE 14: 521-23.

<sup>52</sup> DBWE 5: 110-13.

#### 4. The Oxford Group Revival in Switzerland as the Context of Bonhoeffer's Positive Introduction to the Oxford Group

The Swiss Oxford Group was different from its US and British forms. As John Hart observes, the Oxford Group “never became as controversial in Switzerland as it was in Great Britain and the United States, and since its work was readily accepted by many Swiss churches, Brunner’s involvement was not regarded as peculiar.” Hart continues:

Brunner’s leadership contributed to the development of a “Swiss variant” in OGM [Oxford Group Movement]: the focus of the group-meetings was much more centred on Bible study than simply on “reports,” and there was a greater connection with the Church.<sup>53</sup>

Hart argues that in a year of explosive growth, the Oxford Group became known across Switzerland, such that by 1933 Brunner was confident that the majority of Swiss pastors supported the Oxford Group Movement [OGM]; not its theology (which he viewed as suspect) but its practical approach to pastoral care.<sup>54</sup> Brunner’s assertion received public support in a 1935 pastor’s colloquium addressed by Barth, Thurneysen and Brunner. Hart notes that during their presentations “even Thurneysen said he could not reject OGM as a bad thing for the Church,” and at the conclusion of proceedings, when Barth called for a vote on the subject of the Oxford Group, the majority supported the pastoral role of the Oxford Group.<sup>55</sup> This widespread embrace of the Oxford Group approach to pastoral care had its roots in a Group ‘house-party’ that took place at Ermatingen, on the shores of Lake Constance, in the summer of 1932. This gathering triggered the Swiss Group movement’s expansion. A clue to its influence can be gathered from the words of one of its attendees.

Between 200 and 300 people attended the Ermatingen gathering. The Rev. C. F. Andrews, friend of Gandhi and Buchman, was one of the guest speakers. His description of the event provides an insight into the Oxford Group as it then was and helps explain the impact of the occasion. Andrews states that he joined leaders of the Oxford Group at Ermatingen seeking “a fuller vision of God’s love in Christ,” and experienced more than he dared expect.<sup>56</sup> He writes:

Above all I came into glowing contact with those whose first experience of the love of Christ had turned their whole life into a song. .... [The occasion led] my mind away from the last dread act of the Passion

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<sup>53</sup> Hart, *Barth vs Brunner*, 180.

<sup>54</sup> Hart, *Barth vs Brunner*, 197, fn.48.

<sup>55</sup> Hart, *Barth vs Brunner*, 191.

<sup>56</sup> Charles. F. Andrews, *Christ in the Silence* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1933), 37.

outside Jerusalem to the bright dawn of Christ's early ministry on the shores of Galilee, where the first young disciples were called one by one to follow their Lord. We seemed at Ermatingen to have come once more to the fresh vision of those early days. The radiance of the Christian faith had been restored.

. . . The whole atmosphere in this quiet retreat was overflowing with a new spirit. Christ was being born anew in a new age. The contagion of happy laughter around me, so free from pious convention, brought with it at that time an indescribable sense of relief after the dark background of the past weeks. The simple directness of approach to God, as a child approaches its father or mother in absolute trust, seeking guidance, was a joy to me to witness. The enkindling enthusiasm of ardent devotion to Christ as Master and Lord, which was everywhere present, dispersed the last shadow of lingering gloom from my own mind. All things seemed to have become possible to the eye of faith in this newer and younger world. [. . .] They were even now preparing with a splendid courage to face the vast upheaval of the age in which they lived, as they realised within themselves Christ's power afresh. God willing, I must help them just there.

*For once more the word of God had gone forth, 'I will shake the heavens and the earth'.*

There had already begun "a removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain." . . . The great words of the Apocalypse, "And He that sat upon the throne said, Behold I make all things new," seemed about to be proclaimed from on high once more for all the world to hear. Each speaker in turn at Ermatingen had brought before our minds this radiant vision of a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.

The strong impulse to write was now present in fullest measure, and the subject was already prepared. . . . The book I had to write must tell of Christ in the inmost heart. It would be called *Christ in the Silence*.<sup>57</sup>

The testimony delivered by Andrews at Ermatingen was later cited by Emil Brunner as one of the factors that changed his view of the Oxford Group.<sup>58</sup> Brunner relates how "the well-known biographer of Gandhi and intimate friend of Tagore, C. F. Andrews, tells how he noticed a strange easing of racial tension on a recent visit to South Africa, and found the Oxford team's visit was the cause."<sup>59</sup> Andrews testified, Brunner states, that the "incredible changes in the thinking and practice" taking place in South African communities was due to the visit of an Oxford Group team in 1929.<sup>60</sup> According to Brunner this was one of the varied testimonies that contributed to the impression of the reality of the "life-renewing power of the Holy Spirit" as a force bringing about reconciliation. As he wrote in his 1932 Ermatingen memoir:

Der gemeinsame Nenner fast all dieser Erzählungen aber ist dieser: Die Gruppenleute haben uns zum ersten Mal unsere Sünde konkret erkennen lassen, haben uns dazu gebracht, sie zu bekennen und dadurch die bisher unbeachtete oder unwirksame Botschaft von der Versöhnung und Vergebung, von Jesus Christus, dem Gekreuzigten, wirklich zu hören und im Gebet dem lebendigen Gott zu begegnen. Manchmal geschah es, daß die Aufmerksamkeit am Erlebnis als

<sup>57</sup> Andrews, *Christ in the Silence*, 36-39.

<sup>58</sup> Emil Brunner, "Meine Begegnung mit der Oxford Group" [1932], in Emil Brunner, *Ein offenes Wort. Vorträge und Aufsätze 1917—1934*, Vol. 1., Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981), 268-288.

<sup>59</sup> Brunner, "Meine Begegnung," 273 [my translation].

<sup>60</sup> For details of the South African visit see Garth Lean, *Frank Buchman: A Life*. (London: Constable, 1985), 140-43.

solchem, am Menschen selbst haften blieb; aber der Gesamteindruck, den diese Zeugnisse erwecken, ist der von der lebenerneuenden Macht des Heiligen Geistes aufgrund der Botschaft von der Versöhnung.

[The common denominator of almost all these stories, however, is this: the group people made us recognize our sin concretely for the first time, made us confess it and thus really hear the hitherto unheeded or ineffective message of reconciliation and forgiveness, of Jesus Christ crucified, and encounter the living God in prayer. Sometimes it happened that the attention remained on the experience as such, on the person himself; but the overall impression that these testimonies give is that of the life-renewing power of the Holy Spirit due to the message of reconciliation.]<sup>61</sup>

John Hart relates that at Ermatingen “Brunner was able to have a personal conversation with Buchman. During the house-party Brunner experienced a renewal of his own faith.”<sup>62</sup> Brunner’s life changed decisively. Brunner was glowing in his praise of Buchman, comparing him to Blumhardt, and stating that after hearing Buchman’s “incredibly simple” and direct preaching he was “ashamed” of his own over intellectualized sermons. Buchman presented the “whole gospel of the crucified and risen Christ.” The Oxford Group movement, Brunner said, “is what we have been waiting for.”<sup>63</sup>

Buchman’s conversion testimony focused on a particular day in Keswick where he was challenged to reflect upon his life in the light of Christ’s sacrifice. A life-changing event took place. In Buchman’s words he realized that:

My work had become my idol. I did not need any other voice than the voice of the Man on the Cross. I thought of the lines, “This hast Thou done for me, What have I done for Thee, Thou Crucified?” I was the centre of my own life. That big “I” had to be crossed out.” . . . [then followed a concrete realization of sin and a confession of that sin, after which] . . . There was no longer this feeling of a divided will, no sense of calculation and argument, of oppression and helplessness; a wave of strong emotion, following the will to surrender, rose up within me . . . and seemed to lift my soul from its anchorage of selfishness, bearing it across that great sundering abyss to the foot of the Cross.<sup>64</sup>

According to Brunner, what impacted him was Buchman’s “message of sin and the Cross.”<sup>65</sup> Brunner stated that at Ermatingen he too met the Holy Spirit as a life-renewing force. In his words:

Hier ist lebenerneuende, frei-, froh- und gutmachende Kraft, Kraft, die zu einem Leben im Gebet, im Gehorsam, in der Gemeinschaft, im Dienst führt, Kraft in einem Masse, das ich bis anhin nur aus den

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<sup>61</sup> Brunner, “Meine Begegnung,” 273 [my translation].

<sup>62</sup> John W. Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance* (New York: Peter Lang 2001), 180.

<sup>63</sup> Brunner to Thurneysen, quoted in Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 279 [my translation].

<sup>64</sup> Buchman’s biographer, Garth Lean, suggests that this is the central and oft-repeated message of Buchman. Lean, *Frank Buchman*, 30-31.

<sup>65</sup> Brunner, quoted in Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner*, 180.

Geschichtsbüchern und aus meiner theologischen Besinnung kannte. Sollte es nicht wirklich die Kraft des heiligen Geistes sein?

[Here is life-renewing, freeing, joyful and restorative power, power that leads to a life in the giver, in obedience, in community, in service, power in a form that I have hitherto only encountered in History books and from my theological reflection. Shouldn't it really be the power of the Holy Spirit?]<sup>66</sup>

At Ermatingen, Brunner embraced the Oxford Group's pastoral practice of confessional conversations as his own. In a letter to Thurneysen on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, Brunner argued that there was a complementary fit between his theology and the Oxford Group practice. He said:

« [Mir ist] vor allem immer wieder aufgefallen, wie vollkommen das, was die Leute zu verwirklichen suchen, mit dem übereinstimmt, was ich in meiner Ethik theoretisch entwickelt habe. Keine Gesetzmäßigkeit, sondern alles Abstellen auf das konkrete Gebot Gottes (guidance nennen sie es); kein Moralismus, sondern alles [...] gesehen vom Kreuz, von der Versöhnung in Christus her, [...] Kein Bekehrungskampf, sondern der schlichte Weg: Erkenntnis der Sünde, Vergebung in Christus, Neuwerden aus der *insertio in Christum per spiritum sanctum* (Einpflanzung in Christus durch den heiligen Geist).»

[“[I have] noticed again and again how perfectly what people are trying to achieve [in practice] corresponds with what I have developed theoretically in my ethics. No legality, but everything based on God's concrete commandment (guidance they call it); not moralism, but everything . . . seen from the cross, from the reconciliation in Christ, . . . Not a convulsive conversion, but the simple way: knowledge of sin, forgiveness in Christ, becoming new from the *insertio in Christum per spiritum sanctum* [grafting into Christ by the Holy Spirit].”]<sup>67</sup>

Thurneysen also refers to the interest aroused by Ermatingen, and to the many people who were providing similar enthusiastic reports of the occasion. Anticipating Barth's scepticism, Thurneysen assured Barth on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, that:

Mir ist ganz klar geworden, daß Emil einfach unter der Berührung mit dieser Sache etwas erlebt hat, das undiskutabel für ihn etwas bedeutet und das er auch allen theologischen Einwänden gegenüber sicher mit Recht festhält und verteidigt.

[It has become very clear to me that Emil simply experienced something through his encounter which means something undisputable to him and which he is certainly right to hold and defend against all theological objections.]<sup>68</sup>

Brunner later stated that until he met the Oxford Group at Ermatingen he had the correct theological recipe but had never tried it out: at Ermatingen he discovered the actual divine meal was more filling than the phraseological menu.<sup>69</sup> For Brunner the reading of scripture was no longer a tool for advancing his theological ambitions, but a means for discovering God's will for our life and walking with Christ in his loving fellowship, seeking collectively

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<sup>66</sup> Brunner to Thurneysen, quoted in Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 278 [my translation].

<sup>67</sup> Brunner to Thurneysen, quoted in Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, -277 [my translation].

<sup>68</sup> Karl Barth, *Karl Barth-Eduard Thurneysen, Briefwechsel. Band 3, 1930-1935*, ed. Caren Algner, (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2000), 265 [my translation].

<sup>69</sup> See Lean, *Frank Buchman*, 212.

to find and obey the will of God. Henceforth, as Sallmann observes, Brunner viewed the Oxford group as a counterpart to “dialectical theology,” with the latter renewing dogmatics, while the Oxford Group Movement renewed pastoral theology and a practical approach to pastoral care.<sup>70</sup>

After Ermatingen Brunner began to testify to one and all about the way the spirit of God was working through the Oxford Group. Hart notes that Brunner became active in the Swiss Oxford Group “not only as a speaker at house-parties and rallies, but also as a trainer of leaders for OGM’s ‘Bible Study Circles’.”<sup>71</sup> Hart argues that Brunner was attracted to the Oxford Group because it was a “breath of fresh air” for a church in need of spiritual renewal; in addition it provided an expression of mission and evangelism, one that inspired Brunner to begin calling his theology “missionary theology.” Lastly, “it took sin and ‘distance’ seriously, but also had a place for Christian life which was visible and experiential.”<sup>72</sup> It was this active focus on pastoral care—on addressing the concrete existential reality of sin—that transformed the theological tensions between Brunner and Barth into an unbridgeable chasm.

In 1933, out of a sense that Barth was misunderstanding his support for the Group, Brunner and his Oxford Group colleague, Theophil Spoerri of Zurich University, invited Barth to a private meeting. The meeting, Sallmann observes, was intended to bring clarification and a sympathetic understanding. “But it turned out differently, there was an uproar.” Brunner’s friend Spoerri gave a testimony: a confessional “sharing” in the Oxford Group’s conversational pastoral fashion. Sallmann relates that Brunner later expressed his regret to Thurneysen for the “overly personal” form of Spoerri’s statement.<sup>73</sup> Instead of producing understanding Spoerri’s testimony provoked fury in Barth and signalled a permanent rupture in his relationship with Brunner.<sup>74</sup> Bath said to Thurneysen, a couple of days later, that Spoerri’s contribution produced “a strong repulsion...quite instinctively, with

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<sup>70</sup> Sallmann, “Umstrittene Erweckung,” 17.

<sup>71</sup> Hart, *Barth vs Brunner*, 180.

<sup>72</sup> Hart, *Barth vs Brunner*, 180-81.

<sup>73</sup> Sallmann quotes from Brunner’s letter to Thurneysen, that he «in dieser allzu persönlichen Form lieber nicht gehört hätte». Sallmann, “Umstrittene Erweckung,” 2.

<sup>74</sup> Jehle describes the encounter as follows:

Theophil Spoerri legte ein persönliches «Zeugnis» ab, das selbst Brunner zu weit ging. Es ist anzunehmen — ein Protokoll der Sitzung ist nicht vorhanden —, dass Spoerri Barth direkt aufforderte, sich zu bekehren. Barth reagierte heftig. In einem Telefongespräch orientierte er Thurneysen darüber, dass etwas Unwiderrufliches passiert sei, die Begegnung mit der Gruppe habe bei ihm einen «verheerenden Eindruck» hinterlassen.

[Theophil Spoerri gave a personal ‘testimony’ that even Brunner felt went too far. It can be assumed—there are no minutes of the meeting—that Spoerri asked Barth directly to convert. Barth reacted violently. In a telephone conversation, he informed Thurneysen that something irrevocable had happened, that the encounter with the group had left him with a ‘devastating impression’.] Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 297 [my translation].

almost physical side effects.”<sup>75</sup> Afterwards Brunner told Thurneysen that he could understand that Barth found the “personal testimony of Spoerri embarrassing and tasteless.”<sup>76</sup> Responding to Brunner, Thurneysen accused the latter of engineering the meeting; of deliberately staging the “confession organized for him [Barth],” . . . “with the intention of somehow winning a celebrity, or, let us say more clearly, converting [Barth].”<sup>77</sup> Brunner, on the other hand, while acknowledging that the detail of Spoerri’s confession was tactless, did not doubt its relevance, and regarded Barth’s reaction as evidence that he was captive to his sin.<sup>78</sup>

Although the details of Spoerri’s confession is not recorded, on other occasions Spoerri gave testimonies about the role of the Oxford Group in bringing about the renewal of his own marriage and, given the Oxford Group practice of engineering confessions to suit the needs of those being addressed, there can be little doubt that this was the focus of his “confession.”<sup>79</sup> Barth’s visceral reaction to Spoerri’s testimony cannot be understood without reference to the pressure that he was under regarding his adulterous relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum.

Barth’s affair with von Kirschbaum had been a subject of “cloud of tittle-tattle” since 1926.<sup>80</sup> As recent analysis of their correspondence has proven beyond any reasonable doubt: von Kirschbaum and Barth were lovers.<sup>81</sup> In 1929 Von Kirschbaum had become a member of

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<sup>75</sup> [„ein «kräftiges Sichabstossen voneinander — es geschah dies bei mir ganz instinktiv, [...] fast mit physischen Begleiterscheinungen ...»“], Sallmann, “Umstrittene Erweckung,” 2 [my translation].

<sup>76</sup> Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 298 [my translation].

<sup>77</sup> Sallmann, “Umstrittene Erweckung,” 2 [my translation].

<sup>78</sup> In the Oxford Group pastoral tradition, small groups meet together, and in the fashion popularized by AA mutual support groups, members of the group will share their experience of the sin that is holding their brother captive (in the case of AA, rock bottom experiences of alcohol addiction). On AA origins in the Oxford Group, see B. Dick, *Turning Point: A History of Early A.A.'s Spiritual Roots and Successes* (San Rafael, CA: Paradise Research Publications, 1997), chaps. 2 & 3. Such sharing of concrete experiences of sin is intended to create a context for a group “quiet time,” in which subject’s wait for “luminous thoughts” and later “share” (confess) their own concrete truth. Alcoholics in denial frequently respond with hostility to a particularly challenging testimony. Such anger, from an Oxford Group/AA perspective, is evidence of the sinner’s rejection of God’s will and determination to remain “captain of their ship.”

<sup>79</sup> This testimonial style is exemplified by the Alcoholics Anonymous practice of AA members sharing their “rock bottom” experiences, and the way in which alcoholics take the first “step” of confessing their powerlessness over drinking and take the next of surrendering their lives to a power “greater than themselves.” Dick, *Turning Points*, 239ff. The Oxford Group “personal challenge” is based upon a relevant testimonial followed by a time of quiet reflection in which the subjects listen together for God’s guidance, before “sharing” any “luminous” thoughts that they receive. See for example, the way in which the celebrated gay writer, Beverly Nichols relates his own Oxford Group “change” to listening to God in his chapter on “Christ and Sex,” in B. Nichols, *The Fool Hath Said* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), 207-237.

<sup>80</sup> Barth, quoted in Christiane Tietz, “Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum,” *Theology Today* 74, no. 2 (2017): 89fn.66.

<sup>81</sup> As Susanne Hennecke observed, from 1926 Barth had turned away from his wife. Von Kirschbaum was “Barth’s secretary, theological colleague and assistant, independent intellectual, travel and life companion and somehow also personal confidante but more precisely quite plainly also his friend and lover.” Susanne Hennecke, “Biography and theology. On the connectedness of theological statements with life on the basis of the



the Barth household and having her presence in her own home had pushed Barth's wife to the point of collapse. Thurneysen, a trusted friend and confidant of all, was fearful of the sanity and physical safety of the three partners. By 1933 this affair had come to the attention of enemies of the Confessing Church and was being used by the German Christians to attack Barth's credibility.<sup>82</sup> Barth's mother summed up the problem: "What is the most brilliant theology good for, if it is to be shipwrecked in one's own house?"<sup>83</sup>

In Oxford Group parlance to refuse to confess sin and "change" was to refuse God. Barth's response to Spoerri's confession crystalized Brunner's position regarding Barth. Barth was not only defying the ordinances of the Church; he was refusing to listen for the *personal* leading of the Holy Spirit. Jehle, quoting from Brunner's letter to Thurneysen explains why the occasion brought about their divorce:

Er sei Barth zwar «dauernd dankbar» für die Hilfe, die er ihm und der Kirche geleistet habe «in der Wiederentdeckung der Bibel und der Reformatoren». Endgültig scheidet er sich aber von ihm, «insofern er der Schöpfer der spezifisch 'Barthschen Theologie' sei..... Karl Barth habe «sich in seine dialektische Theologie, d. h. in seine von aller theologisch-kirchlichen Tradition abweichende Sonderlehre dermaßen verstiegen, dass er nicht mehr auf der Ebene steht, wo Menschen leben». Brunner sprach weiter von Barths «erschreckender Weltund Lebensferne» [ ]. Barth sei ihm an jenem Abend «ungeheuerlich zusammengeschrumpft». Er werde «auch in Zukunft auf ihn hören», das verstehe sich von selbst. Entscheidendes erwarte er allerdings nicht mehr von ihm, «es sei denn, auch er sei der Wandlung fähig».

[He was "always grateful" to Barth for the help he had given him and the Church "in the rediscovery of the Bible and the reformers." But he finally parted from him, "insofar as he was the creator of the specifically 'Barthian theology' .....Karl Barth had "become so absorbed in his dialectical theology, that is, into his special doctrine - which deviates from all theological-ecclesiastical tradition, that he no longer stands on the level where people live." Brunner went on to speak of Barth's "frightening distance from the world and life,..... Barth had "shrunk tremendously" for him that evening. He would "listen to him in the future," that goes without saying. However, he no longer expects decisive things from him "unless he too was capable of change."]<sup>84</sup>

In the years after the acrimonious exchanges of 1933 the dispute between Brunner and Barth festered, with the "denouement" occurring, according to Hart, in the 1935 pastor's colloquium on the subject of the Oxford Group Movement: should it be accepted or rejected by the Church?<sup>85</sup> Barth, Brunner and Thurneysen were invited to make presentations. Barth

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correspondence between Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum (1925-1935)," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 77, no. 4/5 (2016): 325, 328.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen J. Plant, "When Karl met Lollo: The Origins and Consequences of Karl Barth's Relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 72, no. 2 (2019): 137.

<sup>83</sup> Tietz, "Barth and Charlotte," 88.

<sup>84</sup> Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 298 [my translation]

<sup>85</sup> Jehle and Hart show that the famously acrimonious 1934 Natural Theology debate can only be properly understood in the context of their Oxford Group dispute. Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Natura and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply "No!" by Dr Karl Barth* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1946). First published in German in 1934.

insisted that the “issue boiled down to whether the Church could trust the Holy Spirit to address the word of God effectively to humanity,” as opposed to Brunner’s mistaken contention that the Word had to be addressed in a “unique way to those listening.”<sup>86</sup> Brunner defended the Oxford Group insistence on tailoring the Bible’s message using the ‘reports’ of concrete individuals and the concrete answers that they have found; he rejected Barth’s contention that the Bible’s challenge was universal and did not need to be reframed especially for the particular listener and their historical situation. According to Hart, in the course of the discussion “Thurneysen kept trying to mediate between Barth and Brunner,” however at the end Barth insisted on a vote, in which those attending the symposium had to declare where they stood on the Oxford Group Movement (OGM). Quoting an observer, Hart relates:

Most of the participants believed that, despite some theological objections, OGM was beneficial for the Church; . . . After listening in silence, Barth . . . ‘with a threatening raised finger . . . addressed all of us, saying that we now bore the responsibility if spiritual harm happened in the Swiss church’.<sup>87</sup>

The dispute with Barth signalled the much more concrete way in which Brunner expected the Holy Spirit to intervene in the concrete particulars of the individual’s life and, through the individual’s obedience, impact fruitfully upon their personal and public life at home, at work, in the nation, and in the church.<sup>88</sup> For Brunner it was revelation through the Bible, not Buchman, that was leading the Swiss Oxford Group revival: the struggle was between those willing to ‘change’ and those locked in sin, unable to confess their sin, unable to change and open their mind’s to God’s guidance. Thurneysen’s support for the OGM pastoral practices, in opposition to Barth’s critique, signalled the alignment of his views with those of Brunner with respect to the way in which both men had appropriated Group ideas such as guidance and confession within a Church and Bible based context.

One of the criticisms of Thurneysen with the Anglo-Saxon OGM approach to ‘guidance’ was that they failed to acknowledge the crucial role of the Bible as the place mediating people’s encounter with God’s revelation. “Guidance,” Thurneysen writes, “is not a sudden idea, which comes to us in moments of trance, when I am let into God’s secrets by a sort of clairvoyance. Guidance is a miracle, performed not by my spirit but by the Holy Spirit of

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<sup>86</sup> Hart, *Karl Barth vs Emil Brunner*, 191.

<sup>87</sup> Hart, *Karl Barth vs Emil Brunner*, 191.

<sup>88</sup> This is a theme that Brunner developed in his ethics (*The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1937), defining a Christian ethics in dialectical theological terms as obedience to Christ’s commandments in the family, work, state and church; Bonhoeffer later embraces Brunner’s position and develops it in his own Christian ethics, through the idea of ‘Christ’s Mandates’. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 388-408. Hereafter DBWE 6.

God.”<sup>89</sup> Thurneysen believed that Anglo-Saxon Group conversion stories convey “the impression that man, the pious man, stands in the centre of the picture. In the Bible the position is reversed: there man is small and God is great. And that is the meaning of true guidance.”<sup>90</sup> Within this theological context, Thurneysen, Brunner and the majority of Swiss pastors were able to affirm the Swiss Oxford Group’s pastoral approach to ‘life-changing’.

The Brunner-Barth conflict thus related to Brunner’s willingness to embrace specific pastoral practices of the Oxford Group, along with the Oxford Group’s conviction that the Church (along with its Sunday sermons) has lost touch with the mass of today’s society. Brunner wanted the Oxford Group to learn from dialectical theology and dialectical theology to learn from the Oxford Group. He wanted Biblical truths shared in ways that related to the concerns of today’s world (as illustrated by Andrews’ stories of Oxford Group change in South Africa). Above all he advocated learning to listen to the Bible in a new way: to listen in silence and hear God’s personal word, to confess concrete sins to a brother, and be united in Christ. Hence Brunner argued that the “Church neglects its pastoral duty if, with the same earnestness with which it continually reflects upon its message, it does not reflect upon the way to reach again the men who are now estranged from the tradition of the Church.”<sup>91</sup> For Brunner, mobilizing the lay members of the Church and “send all believers into action for the work of witness,” is an expression of the Reformation conviction that the true church as a “universal priesthood of all believers.”<sup>92</sup>

With this aim in mind, the Oxford Group hosted mass gatherings, intended to inspire lay activism. Sallmann describes one such Swiss gathering, when in 1937 “a huge national conference was held in Lausanne in the exhibition halls of Comptoir Suisse. Fifty extra trains from all over Switzerland brought the participants to Lausanne.”<sup>93</sup> Ten thousand citizens responded to the call. Brunner had invited the Swiss people to this gathering in a powerful invitation, beginning with these words:

«In Lausanne wird die gesamte Schweizer Gruppe sich ihrer selbst, zum ersten Mal als Heer Christi auf dem Marsch, bewusst werden. So ein Truppenzusammenzug bedeutet eine gewaltige innere Stärkung, eine Erweiterung des Blickes und eine Anfachung des rechten Kampfgeistes. Und den haben wir bitter nötig, wenn es wirklich vorwärts gehen soll. Unser Volk wartet darauf. [...] Wir wollen die Sünden der Einzelnen als Sünden, die das Volk zertrennen und vergiften, zeigen und wollen vor allem den neuen Weg, den wir gefunden haben, als Weg für das Volk als Ganzes klar machen. [...] [W]ir müssen jetzt

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<sup>89</sup> Thurneysen “Guidance,” 308.

<sup>90</sup> Thurneysen “Guidance,” 307.

<sup>91</sup> Brunner, *The Church and the Oxford Group*, 23

<sup>92</sup> Brunner, *The Church and the Oxford Group*, 24

<sup>93</sup> Sallmann “Umstrittene Erweckung,” 12.

mehr als bisher zeigen, wie der Einzelne ein Teil des Ganzen ist, wie seine Sünde das Volk zerstört und mit seinem Neuwerden die Volksheilung beginnt; [...]. Und nun <alle Mann auf Deck>. [...] Es muss wirklich eine Generalmobilisierung werden [...]. Es handelt sich [...] darum, dass das Schweizervolk wieder merkt, was Gott von ihm will.»

[“In Lausanne, the entire Swiss group will become aware of themselves, for the first time as the army of Christ on the march. Such a concentration of troops means a tremendous inner strengthening, an expansion of vision and a kindling of the right fighting spirit. And that’s what we really need if we are to move forward. Our people are waiting for it. [...] We want to show the sins of individuals as sins that divide and poison the people, and above all we want to make clear the new way we have found as a path for the people as a whole. [...] [W]e must now show more than before how the individual is a part of the whole, how his sin destroys the people and how the people's healing begins with his new birth; [...]. And now “all hands on deck!” [...] It really must be a general mobilization [...]. It is [...] a matter of the Swiss people realizing again what God wants from them.”]<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 275 [my translation].

## 5. Ermatingen and Bonhoeffer's First Meeting with Brunner

In the summer of 1932 when Bonhoeffer visited Switzerland, the Swiss Oxford Group movement was in its infancy. Hitler had not yet gained office and Bonhoeffer was in despair over the state of the Church. It was in this context that Bonhoeffer, through Sutz, met Emil Brunner for the first time. Prior to his visit to Switzerland, Bonhoeffer's state of mind was burdened. He told Sutz early in 1932 that he was finding his intellectual work dissatisfying ("I don't like the product anymore"). Rather than devote his time to his lectures he had devoted himself almost wholly to his "confirmands." They were his joy in life; the Church itself inspired only despair.<sup>95</sup> One motivation for this despair was the Church's failure to meet the pastoral needs of its members. Prior to his September visit, Bonhoeffer reflected on this to Sutz as follows:

Sometimes it seemed to me as if pastoral care was where our work broke down. What hours or minutes of torture often pass by when the other person or I try to have a pastoral conversation, and how hesitatingly and drearly it goes on... I often try to console myself with the fact that I think this whole kind of pastoral care is also something that didn't exist even earlier and is completely unchristian. But maybe it really is the end of our kind of Christianity [*Christlichkeit*] that we fail here. We have learned to preach again, at least a very little bit, but pastoral care?<sup>96</sup>

It was clear that at this point Bonhoeffer had no notion of the kind of pastoral conversation that he was later to advocate and make central to his understanding of how an individual's life is renewed in Christ.

In the months and weeks leading up to his encounter with Brunner, Bonhoeffer had been reading Brunner's pre-OG theological works, seeking theological answers to the challenge that he believed the Church in Germany was facing. He had been greatly inspired by Brunner's work on ethics and had adopted it as his own framework for his lectures on ethics.<sup>97</sup> But he felt Brunner was too individualist in his approach to God's commandments; Bonhoeffer was seeking a vision of the Church that could meet the challenge of Hitler. He clung to a long-cherished dream of finding a "host of witnesses" that would exemplify the true Christian life lived in obedience to God's Sermon on the Mount. He despaired about the state of the Church in the West; Gandhi had become his beacon of light.<sup>98</sup> Bonhoeffer did not go to

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<sup>95</sup> Bonhoeffer to Sutz, 28 Feb, 1932. DBWE 11: 97

<sup>96</sup> Bonhoeffer to Sutz, 28 Feb, 1932. DBWE 11: 98.

<sup>97</sup> Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth. "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932-1933* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 486-87. Hereafter DBWE 12.

<sup>98</sup> Clifford J. Green, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letter to Mahatma Gandhi," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, (2020): 1-9. doi.org/10.1017/S0022046920000093.

Switzerland seeking to meet the Oxford Group, but for unrelated reasons he was looking forward to meeting with Andrews and Brunner. It just happened that in the week prior to Gland, both Andrews and Brunner had been attending the Oxford Group conference at Ermatingen.<sup>99</sup>

Freshly inspired after Ermatingen, Andrews joined Bonhoeffer at the Gland youth conference from the 25<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> of August.<sup>100</sup> Bonhoeffer's report on Gland noted that "C. F. Andrews, the friend of Gandhi . . . to our particular joy participated in the entire conference."<sup>101</sup> Andrews delivered one of the major lectures during the Gland conference, on a theme listed as "Religious message."<sup>102</sup> During the conference Andrews and Bonhoeffer met and talked. Andrews subsequently recalled his encounter with Bonhoeffer in a letter commending him to Gandhi: "I do hope you will be able to see him [Bonhoeffer]," Andrews' said, "I met him in Switzerland and was greatly impressed with his convictions."<sup>103</sup> Bonhoeffer's subsequent actions indicate that he responded positively to Andrews' Ermatingen conviction that we encounter "Christ in silence," and that Christ's message of love is what Gandhi "has interpreted, through his actions."<sup>104</sup>

Immediately after the Gland meeting, from the 30<sup>th</sup> of October to the 4<sup>th</sup> of September, Bonhoeffer joined Sutz.<sup>105</sup> During these days Bonhoeffer met with both Barth and Brunner, but it was the latter encounter that Bonhoeffer had previously been focused upon.<sup>106</sup> Bonhoeffer and Brunner spent an afternoon together. No record of their conversation exists, but both Bonhoeffer's desire to meet Brunner and an indication of what was on his mind can be derived from his letters to Sutz prior to the meeting, and from the closing address that he delivered at the Gland conference on August the 29<sup>th</sup>. Likewise, an indication of Brunner's

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<sup>99</sup> Around 330 people met at the Ermatingen conference for ten days, between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of August 1932 (Sallmann, "Umstrittene Erweckung," 9).

<sup>100</sup> Benarsidas Chaturvedi and Marjorie Sykes, observe that prior to Ermatingen Andrews had been exhausted and dispirited, but after Ermatingen he was rejuvenated. See Benarsidas Chaturvedi and Marjorie Sykes, *Charles Freer Andrews: A Narrative* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), 275.

<sup>101</sup> DBWE 11: 383-84.

<sup>102</sup> The contents of Andrews' address are not recorded. DBWE 11: fn.20, 383.

<sup>103</sup> Andrews to Ghandi, letter of 14 May 1934, quoted in Green, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letter to Mahatma Gandhi," 3.

<sup>104</sup> Andrews, *Christ in the Silence*, 15.

<sup>105</sup> Postcard to his Parents, Zurich, September 4, 1932, DBWE 11: 144.

<sup>106</sup> In three letters prior to his visit to Sutz in 1932, Bonhoeffer had referred to Brunner, and although Sutz's letters no longer exist, it is clear that Sutz was positive about Brunner's new work on ethics. Bonhoeffer subsequently asks if it might be possible to meet Brunner. See letters to Erwin Sutz, Berlin, 28<sup>th</sup> February, May 17<sup>th</sup>, and August 1932, DBWE 11: 99 & 138-9.

state of mind can be derived from the previously cited correspondence between Brunner and his theological colleagues.

In a personal letter to Sutz in August, just before his time with Brunner, Bonhoeffer summed up his preoccupations. He believed that the Church should be providing concrete interpretations of God's will relevant to the current catastrophic situation in Germany. The Church community should be a "light on the hill" to the surrounding polis. It should be exercising the "power of the keys"<sup>107</sup> in excommunicating those who wilfully deny the teachings of Christ and sin against God's commandments. Not just calling out individual's sinning against Christ's commandments but challenging those who would make the Church complicit in sin, such as German Christians seeking to make the Church a vehicle for Hitler's ideology. These are the 'ethical problems' that preoccupied Bonhoeffer at this time; they were concerns Brunner had addressed in his work in ways that only partially satisfied Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer wrote:

Basically, it all depends on the problem of ethics, that is, actually on the question of whether it is possible for the concrete commandment to be proclaimed through the church ..... After the whole book [Brunner, *Divine Imperative*], it remains unclear what it means for the church that it can give a concrete commandment or not give it. In your sermons, I was moved by the fact that it seems to be for you almost exactly as it is for me.<sup>108</sup>

Bonhoeffer's closing address at Gland suggests that the conference had sharpened his anxiety about the Church and its mission.<sup>109</sup> He began with the attention-grabbing words: "The Church is dead," and continued: "Has not each of us at this conference, in all seriousness, lived through hours in which this fear ..... that it is too late, that it is all over with Christ's church, and that all our actions here are only to make the farewell easier for us and to delude us about reality ..... with the fear that everything that we undertake here as actions of the church could be too late, meaningless, even frivolous?"<sup>110</sup> He then focused on the purpose of their Gland gathering: "We come together in order to hear Christ! Have we heard him? I can only ask here. Each of us must answer for himself." Bonhoeffer then referred to "a great apprehension that has forced itself upon me during the entire conference," that we "prefer our own thoughts to those of the Bible."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> DBWE 11: 121-122.

<sup>108</sup> DBWE 11: 136-7.

<sup>109</sup> DBWE 11: 375-381.

<sup>110</sup> DBWE 11: 375.

<sup>111</sup> DBWE 11: 378.

We no longer read the Bible seriously. We read it no longer against ourselves but only for ourselves. If this entire conference is to have had a great meaning, it would perhaps be to show us that we must read the Bible in an entirely different way by the time we meet again.<sup>112</sup>

Recalling Paul's obedience in bringing Christ's salvation to Europe, Bonhoeffer concluded his Gland speech by issuing a challenge: "Europe calls a second time: come and help us. Europe, the world wants to be won over a second time by Christ. Are we ready?"<sup>113</sup>

Bonhoeffer's Gland speech gives an indication of his state of mind when he met with Brunner a day or two later. In contrast to Bonhoeffer's anxiety, Brunner had just experienced a spiritual renewal that had made him profoundly optimistic. He had been struck by the simplicity of Buchman's Ermatingen statement and impressed by the power of silence and confession. Jehle sums up what moved Brunner as follows:

Er schätzte die Stille, die er den «Quellpunkt der Gruppenbewegung» nannte. Die «Anleitung zum Stillesein und Gebet», die sie in der Gruppe bekommen hätten, sei «für manche, die schon jahrelang «glaubten», ihre Bibel lasen, zur Kirche gingen und zu beten versuchten, ohne dass das in ihrem Leben etwas bedeutet hätte, eine Lebenswende geworden. Aus dieser Stille heraus wurde ihnen Glaube, Bibel, Kirche und das Gebet selbst neu.» Dass «einer dem anderen [ein] Beichtiger» wurde, die «Aussprache unter vier Augen vor Gott», war für Brunner der schönste Ausdruck des allgemeinen Priestertums. «Beichte sollte nicht der Ausnahmefall, sondern der Normalfall sein», wozu es keinen Pfarrer brauche. «Nach Luthers Rat ist irgendein vertrauenswürdiger Freund dafür der Richtige.»

[He appreciated the silence which he called the "source of the group movement." The "guidance on silence and prayer that they received in the group" was a turning point "for some who had" believed "for years, read their Bible, went to church and tried to pray without this having meant anything in their lives. Out of that silence, faith, Bible, church and prayer itself became new to them." For Brunner, the fact that "one person became a confessor to the other", in a "private one-to-one discussion before God," was the most beautiful expression of the general priesthood. "Confession should not be the exception, but the normal case," for which no pastor is needed. "According to Luther's advice, some trustworthy friend is the right man for it."]<sup>114</sup>

Hart states that the positive message of the Oxford Group is, in Brunner's words:

Living biblical Christianity, i.e., there is truly, the possibility of becoming different. God re-creates men through Jesus Christ – that is not theory, but a real happening, as in the New Testament. Destroyed human life becomes holy again, destroyed marriages, destroyed relationships between men become good again; men in all callings and standings become so different that one asks them: what has happened to you?<sup>115</sup>

Jehle observed from his study of Brunner's correspondence that Brunner embraced the Oxford Group practices of practice of meditative "guidance" in "quiet times" and confessional "sharing." Quoting from Brunner's letters, Jehle notes that:

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<sup>112</sup> DBWE 11: 378.

<sup>113</sup> DBWE 11: 381.

<sup>114</sup> Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 288 [my translation].

<sup>115</sup> Brunner, quoted in Hart, *Barth vs Brunner*, 187.



Emil Brunner nahm das [Die Beichtpraxis der OG] in jenen Jahren auch für sich persönlich ernst. In Briefen an ihm vertraute Menschen sprach er offen von seinen dunkeln Seiten, etwa von Hassgefühlen, die sich sogar in Todeswünschen ausdrückten. «Ich hätte ihn in dieser Minute erschlagen mögen. Der Hass kochte in mir», bekannte er in einem Brief an Theophil Spoerri über einen gemeinsamen Freund. «Ich konnte mit dem Groll nicht fertig werden, obschon ich wusste, dass ich schwer im Unrecht war. [...] Hilf mir, den Hass [...] zu überwinden. Ich will ihn nicht hassen.» Spoerri hielt «Gegenrecht» und gewährte Brunner in sein inneres Leben tiefe Einblicke. Einmal bekannte er sogar, Brunner «nicht richtig geliebt» zu haben, er habe ihn wohl als einen Kameraden gesehen, «aber immer noch zugleich als Figur auf einem Schachbrett». Man hielt nichts voreinander zurück und spürte darin eine Änderung des Lebens. Brunner sprach von einer «neuen Freudigkeit» und davon, dass sich auch die Beziehung zu seiner Frau dank «Oxford» verbessert habe.

In those years Emil Brunner took this [the confessional practice of the OG] seriously for himself too. In letters to people he knew, he spoke openly of his darker side, such as feelings of hatred, which were even expressed in death wishes. “I wanted to kill him that minute. The hatred boiled in me”, he confessed in a letter to Theophil Spoerri about a mutual friend. “I couldn't cope with the resentment, although I knew I was gravely wrong. [...] Help me to overcome the hatred [...]. I don't want to hate him.” Spoerri held “reciprocal rights” and granted Brunner deep insights into his inner life. At one point he even confessed that he had “not really loved” Brunner, that he had seen him as a comrade, “but still at the same time as a piece on a chessboard.” Nothing was held back from each other and a change in life was felt. Brunner spoke of a “new joy” and [shared] that the relationship with his wife had also improved thanks to “Oxford”.<sup>116</sup>

This is the Brunner that Bonhoeffer met; a man (like Andrews) that was eager to speak about his Ermatingen experience and to testify to his newfound life in Christ. No record exists as to what was said during their afternoon together. The only direct evidence of Bonhoeffer's response to his conversation with Brunner is provided in a subsequent letter to Sutz.

Bonhoeffer states that he will “always be grateful” for the “new experiences” that took place in the course of his visit, and specifically expresses gratitude for his time with Brunner. In Bonhoeffer's words:

Those were days back then in September for which I will always be grateful to you. For me the stay at your home was not only the refuge for one who was theologically homeless, for which I had longed for such a long time and on which I can only think back with nostalgia in the cold solitude up here— but everything was so full of new experiences and memories that those days are still very much with me today..... Write soon! I am looking forward to it very much. Tell Brunner how grateful I am to him for the afternoon.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 289 [my translation]. Note that Spoerri and Brunner followed the Oxford Group practice of meditation (“quiet times”) and confessional (reciprocal “sharing”) of significant temptations, failings, difficulties and challenges. Oxford Group members followed a practice in which team members agreed to act as “sharing” partners, providing one on one fellowship of the sort that AA later adopted in their “buddy” system.

<sup>117</sup> DBWE 12: 156.

## 6. Bonhoeffer's 'Change' and Its Consequences

It is possible that when Bonhoeffer expressed his gratitude for his afternoon with Brunner that he was simply being polite; however, in previous letters Bonhoeffer had been blunt in criticising Brunner.<sup>118</sup> Given their passionate views it is far more probable that the conversation that took place between Brunner and Bonhoeffer was a challenging exchange of views, of the sort that provoked such a visceral reaction in Barth. Subsequent evidence of a life-changing encounter in Bonhoeffer's life is consistent with the Oxford Group understanding of "change."<sup>119</sup>

The important change that took place in Bonhoeffer's life was not theological. In his 1927 doctoral thesis he had stated: "It should be added that I consider it the most important task for today to make private confession once again a living source of strength for the church community."<sup>120</sup> It was not the theological recipe that changed but its implementation. That Bonhoeffer's life underwent a dramatic change in the latter half of 1932 is confirmed by Bethge.<sup>121</sup> In his biography of Bonhoeffer, under the heading "The Transition from Theologian to Christian," Bethge notes that while Bonhoeffer's own writing reveals a "momentous turning point," that Bonhoeffer deliberately avoided speaking about "the 'beginning' that neither can nor should be known" such that his students "learned nothing about a conscious moment of a turning point."<sup>122</sup> Yet occasionally Bonhoeffer did speak about his own experience, and his words confirm a momentous change in his life. In a letter to Elizabeth Zinn, a close friend of those years, Bonhoeffer broke his silence on his personal life and described to her a "great liberation" that had freed him from the dominion of sin and enabled him to enter into a Christian life. Noting that previously his life was dominated by an

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<sup>118</sup> Bonhoeffer to Sutz, May 17, 1932, DBWE 11: 121-22.

<sup>119</sup> From the standpoint of the Oxford Group a pastoral conversation means sharing our experience of God-led change with our conversation partner, then spending time together listening for God's personal word, followed by a mutual sharing of any thoughts. A critical, scholarly understanding of the Oxford Group is alert to the reality that this pastoral practice can become a dead and ritualized "Methodism." Bonhoeffer was aware of this potential, and he addressed it in subsequent analyses (DBWE 6: 123, fn.93; see also his remarks on 'methodism' and 'secularized methodism' LPP:326, 328-29) but an Oxford Group style pastoral conversation of the sort Bonhoeffer advocated for speaking with the educated has nothing to do with formulaic method. It is simply a heartfelt, honest conversation (DBWE 14: 581).

<sup>120</sup> DBWE 1: 248 fn.117.

<sup>121</sup> EB-DB, 202-07.

<sup>122</sup> According to Bethge, "Bonhoeffer had always been repulsed by the pietists' deliberately told stories of their conversions." EB-DB, 202-06. However, Bonhoeffer stressed that it was the Oxford's *public* confession that he abhorred. He believed confession should be a *private* conversation. (cf. DBWE 14: 108).

intellectual ambition, “that was extremely un-Christian and not at all humble,” Bonhoeffer stated that:

A rather crazy element of ambition, which some people noticed in me, made my life difficult and withdrew from me the love and trust of those around me. At that time, I was terribly alone and left to myself. It was quite bad. But then something different came, something that has changed and transformed my life to this very day. For the first time, I came to the Bible. That, too, is an awful thing to say. I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, had spoken and written about it—and yet *I was not yet a Christian* but rather in an utterly wild and uncontrolled fashion my own master. I do know that at the time I turned the cause of Jesus Christ into an advantage for myself, for my crazy vanity. I pray to God that will never happen again. Nor had I ever prayed, or had done so only very rarely. Despite this isolation, I was quite happy with myself. The Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from all this. Since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly and so have other people around me. That was a great liberation. [my italics]<sup>123</sup>

In another rare reference to his inner life, Bonhoeffer told his brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher, that we “cannot simply read the Bible like other books,” because “in the Bible God speaks to us.” Bonhoeffer affirmed that we must, like Mary, “ponder it in the heart.” Through this new way of reading the Bible life “has become more wonderful to me every day” – “from being far away from God [*der Gottesferne*] and from godlessness [*der Gottlosigkeit*] to new life with Christ in God.”<sup>124</sup> Clearly, like Augustine, Bonhoeffer had found God, but when did this discovery occur?

The German editors of Bonhoeffer’s *Creation and Fall*, Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt, are specific about when the evidence of this change began to manifest itself; they state that in the winter semester of 1932-33, “Bonhoeffer’s life took a turn.”<sup>125</sup> Rüter and Tödt suggest that Bonhoeffer’s winter lecture notes (published as *Creation and Fall*) testified to his new way of reading the Bible; they served as a “spiritual exercise” and are akin to Augustine’s *Confessions*.<sup>126</sup> His students noted a shift in his lecturing style from a scholastic to an intensely personal focus; in the words of Hans Flöter, a student from this seminar: he “found in the text new things of basic importance for life and understanding.”<sup>127</sup> Another student, Erich Klapproth, recalls him stating: “One can never hear it [the word of God], if one does not at the same time live it—and this involves especially *exercitium* [‘practice’]. For us the word of God always lies hidden like a treasure in a field [Matt. 13:44], for we always have to come

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<sup>123</sup> DBWE 14: 134.

<sup>124</sup> DBWE 3: 153.

<sup>125</sup> Rüter and Tödt note that in 1932, “between the planning and the delivery of this course of lectures, Bonhoeffer’s life took a turn” that cast a new light upon his “theological findings” DBWE 3:147.

<sup>126</sup> DBWE 3, 153-5.

<sup>127</sup> Flöter, quoted in De Gruchy’s “Introduction,” DBWE 3: 3.

to the knowledge of God via the cross of Christ.”<sup>128</sup> A J. Kanitz, also a student from that period, described a prayer meeting in 1932 when, speaking with great simplicity, Bonhoeffer stated “that we should not forget that every word of Holy Scripture was a love letter from God directed very personally to us, and he asked whether we loved Jesus.”<sup>129</sup> Bethge writes that Bonhoeffer’s Berlin University students were “surprised” by the change in their professor and made ironic remarks about him. His piety sometimes appeared “too fervent.”<sup>130</sup>

Bonhoeffer was not alone in discovering this new approach to reading the Bible. In 1933 Oxford Group house parties were, in the words of the Rev. G.W. van Deth, helping many people to learn “to read the Bible as a book that was written especially for them.”<sup>131</sup> The Oxford Group’s approach to reading scripture had become a subject of discussion. In 1933 a special edition of *The Student World*, edited by van Deth’s Dutch colleague, Willem Visser’t Hooft, addressed this subject, with contributions from Buchman supporters, such as Henry Van Dusen and David Cairns, as well as ‘outsider’ perspectives from Eduard Thurneysen and others. Thurneysen noted the special prominence of the practice of seeking the personal guidance of God in ‘quiet times’ in the “so-called ‘Group Movement’” and then put forward several reservations. However, he notes that his objections do not apply to “the really judicious leaders of the Group Movement, like my friend Prof. Emil Brunner in Zurich”; who is entirely in agreement with his criticisms. He ends this footnote by stating: “We are indebted to the Oxford Group Movement for its real and important stimulus, and would like what we say to be regarded, not as a rejection of its ideas, but as a desire for cooperation in the common aim.”<sup>132</sup>

The pious Oxford Group style of Bible reading and listening for God’s personal word was reflected in all of Bonhoeffer’s post-1932/33 theological writings. Instead of his previous exemplary display of scholarly erudition, his new style of writing was stripped of footnotes and other scholarly embellishments. Letting go of scholarly ambition was directly related to his Christian ‘change’. In his testimony to Zinn, Bonhoeffer linked this change to facing the “crazy element of ambition” in his life but makes no mention of confession. However, Wolf-

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<sup>128</sup> Erich Klapproth’s notes on the November 8, 1932 start of Bonhoeffer’s lecture course, quoted in footnote 11, DBWE 3: 23.

<sup>129</sup> Personal communication from Kanitz to Bethge in 1955. Quoted in EB-DB, 204

<sup>130</sup> EB-DB, 204.

<sup>131</sup> Rev. G.W. van Deth writing in 1933, after attending an Oxford Group house-party; quoted in Alders, M. J. “De Oxford Groep,” in M. J. Alders, *Een handjevol verkeners: Het Hersteld Verband opnieuw bekeken* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2012), 187.

<sup>132</sup> Thurneysen “Guidance,” 294, 302fn.1.

Dieter Zimmermann confirms that Bonhoeffer acknowledged that a Christian brother played a key role in awakening him to his ambition and turning his life around.<sup>133</sup>

Zimmerman, a close friend of Bonhoeffer, relates his own experience of confessional “sharing” with Bonhoeffer in his memoir, and recalls that Bonhoeffer had often been “troubled by his superiority and influence” and stressed during his seminars on pastoral care the importance of confession as a weapon in the fight against temptation and evil.<sup>134</sup> Bonhoeffer had stated that his “intellect gained a dangerous superiority over his faith. *However, he had a ‘brother’ call him back to simplicity and service.*” [my italics]<sup>135</sup> This suggestion that “a brother” called him back to simplicity and service fits with Bonhoeffer’s own subsequent approach to pastoral conversations. As Bonhoeffer stated in *Life Together*:

Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride. To stand there before a brother as a sinner is an ignominy that is almost unbearable. In the confession of concrete sins the old man dies a painful shameful death before the eyes of a brother. . . In the deep mental and physical pain of humiliation before a brother - which means, before God - we experience the Cross of Jesus as our rescue and salvation. The old man dies, but it is God who has conquered him. Now we share in the resurrection of Christ and eternal life.<sup>136</sup>

To sum up: Bonhoeffer credited his own transformation to an encounter with a brother who challenged him about his intellectual ambition. The evidence presented confirms that both Brunner’s and Bonhoeffer’s lives underwent a change in the summer of 1932 that was manifest in new pietistic expressions of Christ’s love. Both embraced the Oxford Group model for life-renewing conversations. Bonhoeffer affirmed that “Simple, direct witness of community and of childlike faith,” as practiced by the Oxford Group “works” in eliciting a life changing confession.<sup>137</sup> There is no proof that Brunner was the ‘brother’ that challenged Bonhoeffer, but there is a striking congruence in the timing of the Ermatingen encounter, the form of Brunner’s confessional ‘sharing’, the ‘challenge’ Bonhoeffer alludes to, and the subsequent observed changes in his life. Further evidence that Bonhoeffer’s new “Christian” life may have drawn inspiration from the Swiss Oxford Group way, as practiced by Brunner, comes from a reconsideration of the structural parallels between Bonhoeffer’s and Brunner’s theology of pastoral care. This will be the focus of the next section.

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<sup>133</sup> Zimmermann, *Wir nannten ihn Bruder*, 69-70.

<sup>134</sup> It is well known that Bonhoeffer and Bethge shared confessions, but Zimmermann provides examples of Bonhoeffer’s reciprocal sharing with Joachim Kanitz and cites his own experience. Zimmermann, *Wir nannten ihn Bruder*, 67-70

<sup>135</sup> «Der Intellekt gewann eine gefährliche Überlegenheit gegenüber dem Glauben. Er ließ sich jedoch von einem Bruder zu Einfalt und Dienst zurückrufen.» Zimmermann, *Wir nannten ihn Bruder*, 69-70 [my translation].

<sup>136</sup> DBWE 5: 113-4.

<sup>137</sup> DBWE 14: 579-81.

## 7. Speaking With One Voice: Brunner's and Bonhoeffer's Message to the Church on the Nature of Discipleship

Bonhoeffer's positive regard for Brunner's writings in his 1932/33 lectures, as testified by Zimmermann,<sup>138</sup> reflected a spiritual understanding rooted in their Christological outlook in addressing ethical issues. Jehle has also stressed "the numerous - often affirmative - echoes of Brunner's ethics" in Bonhoeffer's later works, including Bonhoeffer's famous motto, "*only the believers obey and only the obedient believe.*"<sup>139</sup> Bonhoeffer's high regard for Brunner is reflected in a 1940 letter to his sister. Reflecting upon his ethical concern over the relationship between love and law, Bonhoeffer affirms: "I continue to think Brunner says wise things on the matter."<sup>140</sup>

John Hamilton McCabe's 2015 dissertation has drawn attention to the extent to which Brunner's thought informs Bonhoeffer's writings from the time of his pivotal 1932 change onwards. He argues that analysis of Brunner's and Bonhoeffer's pastoral theologies makes it clear that for both men "a response to the Divine Command is no less than a call to Discipleship."<sup>141</sup> He states that although "it may appear at first glance that his [Bonhoeffer's] 'take' from Brunner was minimal," a closer reading suggests that Brunner's thought informed and shaped Bonhoeffer's thought about "discipleship and the mandates, and his conviction that his most significant theological contribution would in due course be his own work on the Ethics."<sup>142</sup>

As McCabe documents (without any reference to the Oxford Group), Bonhoeffer's approach to discipleship has much in common with Brunner's Christian ethics and pastoral approach. McCabe's diagram of the Bible and Cross centred approach of Bonhoeffer expressed in *Discipleship* could as readily be applied to Brunner (see figure 1.).

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<sup>138</sup> Zimmermann, *Wir nannten ihn Bruder*, 12.

<sup>139</sup> Jehle notes [ein Leser findet] „zahlreiche — oft zustimmende — Anklänge an Brunners Ethik finden. Sein berühmter Leitsatz: «Nur der Glaubende ist gehorsam, und nur der Gehorsame glaubt», steht fast wörtlich bei Brunner.“ Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 255. The "obedient believe" quote (unacknowledged) is found in DBWE 4: 63.

<sup>140</sup> DBWE 15: 300-03.

<sup>141</sup> John H. McCabe, "Bonhoeffer: Responsible work - A Diachronic Approach to a Synchronic Theme: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology of Work," Ph.D. diss, (University of Chester, 2015), 102.

<sup>142</sup> McCabe, "Bonhoeffer: Responsible work," 100.



Figure 1. McCabe's representation of the role of scripture centred listening and confession in Bonhoeffer's path of Discipleship.<sup>143</sup>

The following analysis briefly contrasts the key elements of discipleship in Bonhoeffer's and Brunner's work. I will draw upon Bonhoeffer's text *Discipleship* and the account of the Oxford Group's approach to discipleship that Brunner published as *The Church and the Oxford Group* (a text that was in Bonhoeffer's possession).<sup>144</sup>

In *The Church and the Oxford Group* Brunner writes that the Oxford Group way to the new life in Christ (to the "soul of man") "begins with the exposition of the law of God in the Sermon on the Mount, of which it gives a preliminary summary in its four absolutes" – "Absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love."<sup>145</sup> Those seeking God's transforming presence in their life were challenged to reflect upon Christ's standards of moral perfection, as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount. In the light of these standards, they were urged to reflect upon those sins that were standing between them and God. This, Brunner states, "is the first stage of the Group way." Our journey to Christ begins with awakening a personal "consciousness of failure" leading to a "concrete knowledge of Sin." Having come to awareness of sin it is vital that the person confess or "share" these concrete sins with a

<sup>143</sup> McCabe, "Bonhoeffer: Responsible work," 129. Although he stressed the importance of silence and confession for Bonhoeffer, like other Bonhoeffer scholars, McCabe does not link Bonhoeffer's practice to the Oxford Group 'quiet times' and 'sharing'. See for example, Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Joshua A. Kaiser, *Becoming Simple and Wise: Moral Discernment in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Vision of Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2015); and, Wilkes, "Private Confession of Sin."

<sup>144</sup> DBWE 14: 267, footnote 12 refers to Bonhoeffer's copy of Emil Brunner, *Die Kirchen, die Gruppenbewegung und die Kirche Jesu Christi* (Berlin: Furche, 1936); English translation: *The Church and the Oxford Group* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1937).

<sup>145</sup> Brunner, *The Church and the Oxford Group*, 41.

brother; such mutual intimacy purifies and unifies the Church as ‘body of Christ’. “It is the means,” Brunner states, “for removing the hindrances which separate one man from another. It is one of the mysteries of the Group movement, an instrument for the Holy Spirit which binds all together.”<sup>146</sup>

These practices were fundamental to Brunner’s understanding of the Oxford Group practice of seeking and living in obedience to God’s “guidance.” Daily reflections upon scripture, listening for God’s inspiration, writing down inspired thoughts, sharing these with team mates, a community collectively supporting each other in a journey of obedience to God’s will: this was the Oxford Group way. These were practices that Brunner derived from Buchman.<sup>147</sup> Moving from Brunner to Bonhoeffer involves a repetition of the same elements: scriptural ‘listening’, confession and through this act of obedience, a new life in Christ.

In *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer stresses that the faith journey begins with the first act of obedience; “change has to come about by calling people to obedience: only the obedient have faith!”<sup>148</sup> “You complain that you cannot believe? No one should be surprised that they cannot come to believe so long as, in deliberate disobedience, they flee or reject some aspect of Jesus’ commandment.”<sup>149</sup> Hence, Bonhoeffer writes: “First obey, do the external works, let go of what binds you, give up what is separating you from God’s will!”<sup>150</sup>

Do not be surprised that you do not receive the Holy Spirit, that you cannot pray, that your prayer for faith remains empty! Instead, go and be reconciled with your sister or brother; let go of the sin which keeps you captive; and you will be able to believe again!<sup>151</sup>

Bonhoeffer notes that the intellectual is excellent at building up defences against this kind of challenge. Endless arguments prevail. Bonhoeffer writes that:

The pastor breaks through the walls such a person has built with the statement, “Only the obedient have faith.” So the conversation is interrupted, and the pastor’s next sentence is, “You are disobedient; you refuse to obey Christ; you desire to keep a piece of autonomy for yourself. You cannot hear Christ, because you are disobedient; you cannot believe in grace, because you do not want to obey. You have hardened some corner of your heart against Christ’s call. Your trouble is your sin.”<sup>152</sup>

It is at this point that the Oxford Group practice of morning “quiet times” of solitary meditation on scripture comes into play: Bonhoeffer shares Brunner’s belief that this practice

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<sup>146</sup> Brunner, *The Church and the Oxford Group*, 77.

<sup>147</sup> For a summary of Buchman’s approach, see “First Principles” in Lean, *Frank Buchman*, 73-83.

<sup>148</sup> DBWE 4: 69.

<sup>149</sup> DBWE 4: 66.

<sup>150</sup> DBWE 4: 66.

<sup>151</sup> DBWE 4: 66

<sup>152</sup> DBWE 4: 68.



is a crucial element in finding God's inspiration and will for our life.<sup>153</sup> Bonhoeffer stressed the importance of meditation as a time to be "alone with the Word" and find "clear guidance for the steps we have to take." We meditate on scripture, not to "ask how we would preach or teach on this text, but [listen to] what it has to say to us personally."<sup>154</sup> Bonhoeffer, echoing the Oxford Group "quiet time" practice, suggests that the person meditating may, in order to remain focused, "write down one's thoughts."<sup>155</sup> The aim of meditation is not to arrive at a shopping list of divinely ordained actions, or to find "new ideas."<sup>156</sup> The purpose of meditation is to allow God's Word to "enter in and stay with us . . . to work in us, often without our being aware of it."<sup>157</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, Christ's Sermon on the Mount plays a crucial part in helping us to a consciousness of Sin. Consciousness of sin brings us to a moment when the "extraordinary" Grace of Christ might breakthrough into our life. The extraordinary, for Bonhoeffer, "is the love of Jesus Christ himself, who goes to the cross in suffering and obedience. It is the cross. What is unique in Christianity is the cross, which allows Christians to step beyond the world in order to receive victory over the world." Christ's way, Bonhoeffer continues, "is the shining light, the city on the hill. It is the way of self-denial, *perfect love, perfect purity, perfect truthfulness, perfect nonviolence.*"<sup>158</sup> Others have translated this passage using the term "absolute" rather than "perfect purity," and "meekness" rather than "non-violence,"<sup>159</sup> however Bonhoeffer's *four perfections* have the same function as Buchman's *four absolutes*: absolute honesty, unselfishness, purity and love. For both the Oxford Group and Bonhoeffer these four standards of moral perfection evoke Christ's Sermon on the Mount, and the aim of meditating upon our life in the light of these standards is to move us to an awareness of our Sin.

The goal of achieving awareness of concrete sins is not self-improvement but the breakthrough to a life of obedience. Bonhoeffer writes that the Christian disciple achieves the extraordinary, not "in ethical rigor, not in the eccentricity of Christian ways of life, but in the simplicity of Christian obedience to the will of Jesus."<sup>160</sup> The aim of this quest for an obedient

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<sup>153</sup> See Brunner, *The Church and the Oxford Group*, 79ff., 83ff.

<sup>154</sup> DBWE 5: 86-7.

<sup>155</sup> DBWE 14: 935.

<sup>156</sup> DBWE 5: 88.

<sup>157</sup> DBWE 5: 88.

<sup>158</sup> DBWE 4: 144.

<sup>159</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: SCM/McMillan, 1959, reprinted by Simon & Schuster, 1995), 153.

<sup>160</sup> DBWE 4: 185.

life “is not to create a community of those who are perfect. Its sole aim is to build up a community of those who truly live under God's forgiving mercy.”<sup>161</sup> The reason we examine our faith against Christ's standards of perfection and confess our sins to a brother is to bring into being new life. In Bonhoeffer's words:

This faith examination [*Glaubensverhör*] is coupled with confession [*Beichte*], in which Christians seek and receive the assurance that their sins are forgiven. Here God provides the sinner with the help to avoid the danger of self-deception and self-forgiveness. In the confession of sin before another Christian, the flesh dies together with its pride. It is surrendered into shame and death with Christ, and through the word of forgiveness a new human being who is confident of God's mercy comes into being.<sup>162</sup>

The structural parallels between Brunner and Bonhoeffer understanding of pastoral care are apparent: silent reflection on Christ's absolute moral commands and confession are crucial for both Brunner and Bonhoeffer as a path to liberation from the sin and new life in Christ. Bonhoeffer recognized this correspondence when he affirmed that “the primary concerns of the [Oxford] group are essentially those of pastoral care.”<sup>163</sup> Hence, he approved of the Oxford Group focus on “witnessing to the living Christ” and “leading a person to life”; noting that this “is the duty of pastoral love; the correct concern of the Group Movement”<sup>164</sup>. He also discussed dangers associated with the Oxford Group, especially the failure to distinguish the psychic-emotional from the pneumatic-spiritual motivations, and the danger that “my own inner life is mistaken for the one who is actually life itself, namely, Christ. Hence [*Bonhoeffer said to his trainee Pastors, I make*] no reference to my own distress and deliverance but to the *Saviour alone.*” [my italics]<sup>165</sup> The latter reference was to the Oxford Group practice of providing personal testimonials focusing on their own experience of “change.”<sup>166</sup>

In his Finkenwalde seminars on pastoral care Bonhoeffer was at pains to stress that specific personal details of such confessional encounters do not belong in the public domain. In such conversations Bonhoeffer gives all credit to Christ, not his human representative.<sup>167</sup> Thus when Bonhoeffer was explaining to Zimmermann and his fellow trainee pastors how best to break through the fortified walls of pride that imprison intellectuals he refers to the Oxford Group's confessional conversation in positive terms but condemned the public

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<sup>161</sup> DBWE 4: 270.

<sup>162</sup> DBWE 4: 270-1.

<sup>163</sup> DBWE 14: 522-3, 559f., 579-81, 750.

<sup>164</sup> DBWE 14: 522.

<sup>165</sup> DBWE 14: 522.

<sup>166</sup> Brunner, *The Church and the Oxford Group*, 62-78.

<sup>167</sup> As Wilkes argues, the confessor is engaged in ‘vicarious representative action’ (“*Stellvertretung*”); the confession “facilitates *Stellvertretung* and yet confession itself operates via *Stellvertretung*.” Wilkes, “Private Confession of Sin,” 52-3.

broadcasting of such private conversations.<sup>168</sup> Bonhoeffer conveyed the same message to Ernst Cromwell, in a letter of 1935:

The confession of one's sins, of one's own sanctification and devoutness, truly belongs – say I, contrary to what the [Oxford] group says – not in the marketplace but rather in the privacy of your own room. It's never good to talk too much about your own experiences; it's destructive of what you are doing.<sup>169</sup>

Bonhoeffer's letter to Cromwell testifies not only to his promotion of the practice of the private “confession of one's sins,” but also to his promotion of the Oxford Group practice of quiet reflection upon scripture each morning, writing down significant thoughts and “sharing” those morning “quiet time” notes with a spiritual partner.<sup>170</sup> These Oxford Group disciplines, which Bonhoeffer specifically identifies with “sanctification,” involved a heightened stress on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and on group formation in obedience to the leading of the Spirit. Further indications of an Oxford Group influence are manifested in an earlier letter to Cromwell, in which Bonhoeffer expresses his hope for a Holy Spirit led Christian revival, working through groups:

It is becoming more and more clear to me that everything will depend – in human terms – on forming such groups of people, who cannot be destroyed by any means in the world, and who allow themselves to be led by this Spirit. From afar, I count you as belonging to this group, . . . and so the circle grows.<sup>171</sup>

Bonhoeffer's cautionary theological vision of group formation was born of hopes and fears that found expression in the at times heated discussion between Barth and Brunner over the Oxford Group revival and its pastoral practices.<sup>172</sup> Like Thurneysen and Sutz, Bonhoeffer was a silent partner in this deeply personal conflict. Bonhoeffer confessed to Barth in a letter

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<sup>168</sup> See comments stressing the distinction between the Group's *public* as opposed to *private* practice; for example DBWE 14: 108, 522.

<sup>169</sup> DBWE 14: 108-09.

<sup>170</sup> Bonhoeffer comments in one letter to Cromwell “[i]t's a pity you didn't send me your daily notes as you did last time.” DBWE 14: 108.

<sup>171</sup> DBWE 14: 59-60. In 1934 Bonhoeffer was discussing the formation of religious groups, drawing positive inspiration from the Gandhian and Hutterite models of community and negatively, from the success and perceived danger of “enthusiasm” manifested in the Oxford Group (cf. DBWE 13: 161-63). That there was a positive dimension to his estimation of OG teamwork is apparent from his 1936/7 remarks in DBWE 14 on pastoral care and missionary work (DBWE 14: 519-23; 580-820), and his 1944 parentheses in a letter to Bethge, affirming that the Oxford Group, despite its lack of biblical substance, showed potential as a vehicle of “religious renewal” (DBWE 8: 430).

<sup>172</sup> It was this debate that informed his discussion of community in *Life Together* (DBWE 6, Ch 1). Bethge states that *Life Together* was in part written as a “repudiation” of the “Oxford movement.” EB-DB: 470-71. The debate between Barth and Brunner over the Oxford Group reached the English speaking world with the publication of Karl Barth's “Church or Group Movement,” *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, (January 1937): 1-10 and B. H. Streeter's response, “Professor Bath v. The Oxford Group,” *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, (April 1937): 145-49. However, Bonhoeffer, through his networks, was privy to these debates from their onset. As early as 1931 Bonhoeffer was writing to Sutz that Barth believed Sutz had shifted allegiance to Brunner DBWE 11: 38.

of 1936 that he had not written to Barth for three years, because of his silent conflict with him over issues related to sanctification. Bonhoeffer writes:

I quite frankly repeatedly discovered that in several points I was probably moving away from what you yourself think about these questions. Basically the entire period was an ongoing, silent dispute with you, which is why I had to remain silent for a while. Primarily it involved questions concerning the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount and the Pauline doctrine of justification and sanctification.<sup>173</sup>

In responding to Bonhoeffer's letter, Barth expressed concern that Bonhoeffer was following the Oxford Group and Emil Brunner in a "return to the fleshpots of Egypt", and also signalled his disapproval of Bonhoeffer's approach to "scriptural meditation."<sup>174</sup> Thus, the same practical issues regarding sanctification that led Thurneysen to side with Brunner in the 1935 debate would also appear to have underpinned tensions between Barth and Bonhoeffer.

For decades Barth's ongoing relationship with von Kirschbaum, along with Brunner's role in the Oxford Group's emergence as a force in the public life of Switzerland, served as the unspoken and unacknowledged horizon of the breakdown in the relationship between Barth and Brunner. As Jehle, Hart and others are now revealing, these unspoken horizons were significant factors in the development of Barth's and Brunner's theologies.<sup>175</sup> A similar entwinement of issues – further complicated by the role of Buchman in German Church and National politics - forms the complex background to the development of Bonhoeffer's pastoral practice and theology.

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<sup>173</sup> DBWE 14: 252-53.

<sup>174</sup> DBWE 14: 268-69.

<sup>175</sup> Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 323-36; Hart, *Karl Barth vs Emil Brunner*. Susanne Hennecke makes this same point regarding Barth's theology in her essay, "Biography and theology."

## 8. Conclusion

Contra the received position, when Bonhoeffer's own writings are situated in their historical context, his remarks indicate some positive and significant links to the pastoral practice of the Oxford Group. This confirms Zimmerling's and Schmidt's assertion that Bonhoeffer was influenced by the Oxford Group's pastoral practice. Without question, Bonhoeffer criticised aspects of the Oxford Group, especially Buchman's leadership and the Anglo-Saxon form of the Group.<sup>176</sup> Yet, Bonhoeffer's positive references to Oxford Group missionary spirituality reflect an attitude that was shared by other members of the Swiss dialectical theology community. Bonhoeffer's conversation with Brunner and his subsequent comments about the Oxford Group in letters to Sutz and to his students need to be considered in the light of Ermatingen and the impact that Brunner and the Oxford Group was having in Switzerland – and beyond Switzerland, in Germany.

The historical impact of Ermatingen on the Church and the Swiss nation matches well the missionary style that Bebbington and others argue redefined evangelical spirituality and pastoral practice. Bonhoeffer reminds us that by 1936 this new missionary movement was a powerful presence in Germany. "Everyone," he stated to Sutz, "including the church committees, has become infatuated and started flirting with this nonpolitical, lively phenomenon."<sup>177</sup> The principal expression of this 'nonpolitical, lively phenomenon' was the Oxford Group approach to spreading 'change' through 'life-changing' pastoral conversations.

In 1932 Andrews and Brunner found "Christ in the stillness" and pastoral fellowship of the OG house party at Ermatingen. Andrews's experienced a renewal of his inner-life, and Brunner had a life-changing conversation with Buchman. Andrews and Brunner subsequently became advocates of the Oxford Group practice of pastoral conversations. A few days after Ermatingen both men had lengthy conversations with Bonhoeffer. There is no record of their conversations.

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<sup>176</sup> To address Bonhoeffer's criticisms of the Oxford Group would require an explanation of the theological-political struggles in Germany between the German Church and the Confessing Church, and an examination of the Oxford Group's own complex history of involvement in this struggle, as outlined in Anders Jarlet, *The Oxford Group, Group Revivalism, and the Churches in Northern Europe, 1930-1945, with Special Reference to Scandinavia and Germany* (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1995). For an Oxford Group perspective, see Pierre Spoerri, *Frank Buchman and the Germans* (Caux: Caux Books, 2016).

<sup>177</sup> DBWE 14: 272.

Subsequently, Bonhoeffer's students began to observe a change in him; a change congruent with the Oxford style of pastoral conversation that he later recommended and embedded within his own theology of sin and salvation. In Wilke's words, for "Bonhoeffer sin consists of the refusal to be addressed by God; it is a sign of sickness and separation that is manifest in self-sufficiency." The first step towards healing "is through private confession of sin, which for him is the epitome of turning away from self." For Bonhoeffer, "confession is a death out of which spiritual life springs."<sup>178</sup>

A number of significant similarities exist between Bonhoeffer's and Brunner's teachings about Christ's Sermon on the Mount, their approach to reading the Bible, listening for God's specific personal command for us, followed by simple obedience, along with the Oxford Group approach to personal confession. Both men also began to manifest a simple piety that was commented upon by students and friends. Thurneysen immediately recognized the genuine nature of the change in Brunner, and Paul Lehmann was struck by Bonhoeffer's change when they met in Berlin in 1933.<sup>179</sup> In Brunner's words, Bonhoeffer became one of those who become 'so different that one asks them: what has happened to you?' An Oxford Group pattern is evident; one which adds weight to Peter Zimmerling's thesis that the Oxford Group is one source of Bonhoeffer's very "un-Lutheran" form of piety.<sup>180</sup>

Zimmerling's and Schmidt's investigation into an Oxford Group influence on Bonhoeffer's pastoral practice have opened up a new field of Bonhoeffer research.<sup>181</sup> This essay is a contribution to that task. Schmidt's work throws a great deal of light on the complex way in which OG pastoral practice crossed political church boundaries in Germany, giving form to Bonhoeffer's pastoral practice. However, the Swiss influence on Bonhoeffer's practice has not been investigated. A study of the Bonhoeffer-Sutz relationship has yet to be carried out.<sup>182</sup> The role of Sutz in promoting Brunner's Oxford inspired Bible study groups

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<sup>178</sup> Wilkes, "Life and Health," 65, 67.

<sup>179</sup> EB-DB, 203.

<sup>180</sup> Bethge acknowledged, Bonhoeffer's advocacy of "oral confession" as an act to be carried out in practice was, in his Lutheran ecclesiastical and academic environment, "unheard of." EB-DB, 204. That is, as Thurneysen observed and Zimmerling reminds us, it was unheard of until Buchman came along. Zimmerling *Bonhoeffer als Praktischer Theologe*, 187 and Zimmerling "Bonhoeffer und der Pietismus."

<sup>181</sup> Schmidt's work only begins this task. As he notes: "The line that originates in the group movement extends from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the *Communaute de Taizé* through the *Evangelische Marienschwesternschaft Darmstadt* to the *Christusbruderschaft Selbitz* community, also to the *Marburger Kreis* and the *Volksmissionskreis Sachsen*. In the wake of the group movement, these groups combine the elements of community, lay engagement, listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit and mutual pastoral care." Schmidt *Charismatische Spiritualität und Seelsorge*, 22-23.

<sup>182</sup> The only study is Peter Aerne's brief discussion of the relationship (which relies upon published sources): *Die lebenslange Freundschaft von Dietrich Bonhoeffer mit dem Schweizer Pfarrer Erwin Sutz (1906–1987)*.

and related pastoral initiatives remains unclear and is a potential avenue for further research.<sup>183</sup> Sutz's family archives<sup>184</sup>, his parish records and Brunner's own archives would further indicate the extent of Sutz's involvement in Brunner's Oxford Group pastoral initiatives.

Another issue that requires further explanation is why these Oxford Group links have not been previously explored. Hart immersed himself in the Barth, Brunner, Thurneysen correspondence and discovered the vital role of the Oxford Group in their relationships. His response to why this role has "been consistently overlooked by scholarship"<sup>185</sup> points toward the "embarrassment of Brunner's colleagues and students, who minimized his OGM [Oxford Group Movement] involvement as a passing phase."<sup>186</sup> Hart's answer points to the gatekeeper role of scholarly circles in protecting reputations,<sup>187</sup> and implicitly hints at the later toxic reputation of the Oxford Group.<sup>188</sup>

One of the implications of this essay is that the Oxford Group remains 'under studied'. In the thirties it was hailed as a Wesleyan style revival bringing new life to the Church, and simultaneously condemned as a sectarian cult.<sup>189</sup> The Oxford Group exemplifies Matthew Boulton's observation that Christian communities have the same dual nature as the individual sinner. The traditional focus on sin has been individualistic, but Bonhoeffer's theology provides a social rather than individualistic understanding of *simul iustus et peccator*. His theology challenges us to see that good and bad exist simultaneously in individuals and groups: his 1944 remarks concerning the simultaneous hopelessness and potential of the Oxford Group embodies this challenge.<sup>190</sup>

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Bonhoeffer Archives of the Reformed Church, Zurich, published 2006, <http://www.bonhoeffer.ch/texte-zu-bonhoeffer/stuetze-bonhoeffers-in-der-schweiz>

<sup>183</sup> Sutz was deeply involved in Brunner's Zurich circle. He was editor of the Reformed Church Gazette from 1936, and leader of the Zurich pastors working group for eighteen years. Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 632.

<sup>184</sup> Frank Jehle, email correspondence, May 22, 2020.

<sup>185</sup> For Hart's brief response to these questions see Hart, *Barth vs Brunner*, 191.

<sup>186</sup> See Diane Reynolds on the role of Bonhoeffer's "gatekeepers," Diane Reynolds, *The Doubled Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Women, Sexuality, and Nazi Germany* (Eugene OR: Cascade, 2016), 16, 414-17.

<sup>187</sup> On the Bonhoeffer factions, see Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

<sup>188</sup> The toxic reputation of the Oxford Group is reflected in Gabriel Marcel's "A letter of Personal Reassurance to Three Anxious Friends," translated from the French by Helen Hardinge, in Gabriel Marcel, *Fresh Hope For The World: Moral Re-Armament In Action* (London: Longmans, 1960), pp.1-15.

<sup>189</sup> The Oxford Group's renamed heirs, *Initiatives of Change* have recently been addressing these toxic aspects of their movement's history; see for example, "Towards Learning and Healing," Initiatives of Change, Australia, accessed 1 Dec 2020, <https://au.iofc.org/towards-learning-and-healing>

<sup>190</sup> LPP: 328.

The Oxford Group's history manifests the *simul iustus et peccator* nature of groups. Boulton warns that "in the midst of our most exalted religious activity—and indeed not only in the midst of it but also in the form of that activity—we should expect to find and confront the reality of sin and death."<sup>191</sup> Every gift, every victory of the Spirit, brings with it a temptation of self-worship. Individually and collectively, in doctrine and deed, the best are also the worst. As Boulton states:

At every turn, she (the individual) must constantly confess that, if her community is a community of saints, it is simultaneously a community of sinners; if her religion is the true religion, it is simultaneously the religion of unbelief, idolatry, and self-righteousness without peer.<sup>192</sup>

Bonhoeffer observed great potential, but also grave dangers in the Oxford Group. He saw the same dangers in the Confessing Church; it is from within that the real danger lies. In his words: "Wolves in sheep's clothing, enemies of the community in the garb of believers, Satan as an angel of light—that is the danger now. Here the community must keep its eyes open and have attentive guards."<sup>193</sup> But this does not mean individuals or communities become sinless. On the contrary; "*God wants you, but he wants you completely, that is, completely as a sinner.*"<sup>194</sup>

Christ embraces us and our secular world as it is. That is why Bonhoeffer stressed the practice of mutual confession: this act is where we meet the flawed reality of each other, and the flawed reality of our communities, in the encompassing reality of Christ's forgiveness and love.<sup>195</sup> This is the reconciliation that "establishes Christian knowledge in the world and in and among the people who are reconciled in its occurrence";<sup>196</sup> it is through this lived reality of confession and forgiveness that the Holy Spirit summons us to put away idealistic humbug and pretensions of perfection and be embraced and embrace each other completely as we are. Christ loves us as we are and invites us to travel and be transformed with him and through

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<sup>191</sup> Matthew Myer Boulton, "Angels of Light: Luther's Liturgical Attack on Christendom," in Piotr J. Małysz and Derek R. Nelson, eds., *Luther Refracted: The Reformer's Ecumenical Legacy* (Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 78.

<sup>192</sup> Matthew Myer Boulton, *God Against Religion: Rethinking Christian Theology through Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 178.

<sup>193</sup> Bonhoeffer, 1936 Bible Study on Rebuilding the Temple, DBWE 14: 926.

<sup>194</sup> DBWE 15: 314. (italics in the original)

<sup>195</sup> Confession, Wilkes argues, is the neglected theological key to Bonhoeffer's work. She argues that the "emphatic attestations to confession in Bonhoeffer's work are not reflected within the vast array of Bonhoeffer scholarship." Wilkes, *Private Confession of Sin*, 10. Andrew Root notes this aversion to the key element of Bonhoeffer's pastoral practice, concluding his study with the comment that "Bonhoeffer pleads that we must take on the courage to confess our sin to another sister or brother. I know of many lovers of *Life Together*, but none (myself included) who have been bold enough to follow Bonhoeffer's words." Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 207.

<sup>196</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/3, The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part 3, first half-volume*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 214.



him. Our mission is to forgive and accept the flawed reality of each other and, in response to the Holy Spirit's divine promise, become a community which looks beyond itself; we are a people living through Christ's gracious mercy, charged by God to bear witness to this truth "and sent out to establish it."<sup>197</sup> *This is the Way*.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part 1*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956); 152.

<sup>198</sup> Isaiah 30:21, NIV: Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."

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