

Interview with Jennifer M. McBride on *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness*

PLT: What is *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* about?

JMM: The book is primarily a constructive theology addressing Christian public witness. Based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thought, it asks how Protestants should be engaged in public life in a pluralistic society. By pluralistic, I mean a society comprised of people of distinct faiths, cultures, ethnicities, races, and ideologies who must co-exist together and seek after the common good as a people who hold competing convictions about social and political issues, indeed, who hold competing worldviews that shape those convictions. Specifically, the book considers how the church may participate humbly in our pluralistic society, even as it is called to witness boldly to the lordship of Christ. What I argue is that a witness to Christ may be both bold and humble – may be faithful to God and good for society as a whole – if the church's presence in public life is characterized by a disposition of repentance, what I call "confession unto repentance."

PLT: One of the places Bonhoeffer mentions repentance is in prison when he talks about "religionless Christianity." What does he mean by religionless Christianity and how does this enter into your understanding of public witness?

JMM: Bonhoeffer – who, admittedly, talks about repentance only in scattered ways throughout his writings – asks at the end of his life, while in prison, what it might mean to reinterpret central concepts of the Christian faith in a "non-religious" manner. The phrase he used in some of his prison correspondence was "religionless Christianity." When North American theologians first started studying Bonhoeffer decades ago, they were intrigued by this notion of a "religionless Christianity," but they didn't have the full corpus of Bonhoeffer's works to consider at that time. English speaking readers of Bonhoeffer can now see for themselves, thanks to translation projects like Fortress Press' *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, that whatever else religionless Christianity means, it must be christologically interpreted. In other words, it has something to do with Jesus Christ, with how Bonhoeffer understands Jesus' person and work – the meaning of his teachings and of his life, death, and resurrection. Therefore, when Bonhoeffer asks how repentance (along with other central concepts of Christian faith) may be interpreted in a non-religious manner, he is suggesting that Jesus may, in some intriguing way, be understood through the lens of repentance. Jesus' person and work may be an expression or embodiment of repentance. I find it interesting that although Bonhoeffer scholars have written about the meaning of religionless Christianity in general, no one before now has taken up Bonhoeffer's fascinating proposal and tried to re-examine one

or more of the concepts he mentions. This is what I try to do in this book. I go back to his writings before prison to answer his questions in prison in a way that will be useful to us living in North America at the beginning of the 21st century. I want to show that repentance must be central to a Christian public witness in a pluralistic democracy because it manifests a proper humility, one that acknowledges before the world the truth that Christians are complicit in social sin, particularly in the ways that those of us who benefit from an unjust status quo shape and uphold it. I also want to make a more direct theological claim – that repentance is central to public witness because it participates in the transformative work of Jesus. Jesus’ repentance is what gives the church’s repentance its meaning and power.

Of course, talk of Jesus and repentance should set off theological alarm bells for the more orthodox believer. What are we implying about Jesus’ relationship to sin if we say that Jesus repents? With Bonhoeffer, I affirm the orthodox claim that Jesus is sinless. Jesus is sinless in the sense that he obeys the will of God at every point; he is not controlled by death-dealing powers and principalities that want to humiliate, destroy, and oppress human beings. Bonhoeffer, following the Apostle Paul, affirms the sinlessness of Jesus through the idea of obedience, but he guards against putting too much distance between Jesus and sin because such a move would lessen the central meaning of the incarnation – that Jesus is in solidarity with real human beings. Jesus is in solidarity with us in our sin and in our *redemption*. Indeed, for Bonhoeffer, God *wills* Jesus to be in solidarity with human beings, and God’s will, as seen through the cross, can be scandalous. I can’t unpack the argument here – I encourage folks to read the book! – but I do want to say that this unusual and scandalous claim (that Jesus’ person and work may be understood through the lens of repentance) finds a home within the paradoxes of Christian faith, especially within a broader theological, and especially Lutheran, view that characterizes God’s revelation through Christ as hidden. Repentance, as an expression of God’s *righteousness* in Christ, may be understood as one mode of the hidden God, as one of the startling ways that God reveals God’s self to the world – a way that confounds human expectations. God is visible in the world and present in public life in the form of a sinner. In the form of a sinner, he takes responsibility for sin and in this way redeems the world. As the body of Christ, the church is called to do the same – to accept responsibility for sin in public life. This is how the church witnesses to Christ and participates in Christ’s redemptive work – when it takes the shape of his life in the public realm.

PLT: In your book, you use the word “triumphalistic” to name the church’s current disposition in our pluralistic society. Will you say more about what you mean by “triumphalistic”?

JMM: The dictionary definition of triumphalism is an arrogant or self-righteous confidence in a set of beliefs that closes down productive conversation, or, we might add, that closes down productive solutions to issues of public concern. Christian triumphalism is most readily seen in the public square in battles over morality, where

Christians communicate either implicitly or explicitly that we are the models or standard bearers of moral righteousness. If, as Bonhoeffer suggests, witness to Jesus necessitates taking the form of Christ in the world, then our witness cannot be based on setting ourselves up as exemplars of morality and then trying to shape society into the image that we have of ourselves. Jesus did not present himself as an exemplar of morality. Instead, for example, he says to the rich young man in Mark, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” (10:18). The picture of Jesus we get in the Gospels is someone who was baptized with sinners in response to the call to repent, refused to be called good, and instead accepted responsibility for sin.

While Jesus, taking the form of a sinner, brings peace, reconciliation and healing, triumphalism brings division, judgementalism, and self-righteousness. It brings polarizing politics in which every side claims to be the standard bearer of morality and the rightful judge of all. Jesus, on the other hand, demonstrates God’s judgment on the sin that destroys human flourishing by directing that judgment to himself on the cross. In order to have a non-triumphal witness, the church must do the same; it witnesses to God’s judgment on sin and injustice when it points to its own sin instead of the sin of others.

If the church’s public witness is based on it exposing its own sin, public engagement characterized by confession and repentance resists triumphalism. An ethic of confession and repentance mirrors Jesus’ words in Mark and reflects that core Reformation truth that God alone is righteous; therefore, it signals, as Bonhoeffer says, a totally new way of understanding ethics and public witness, one that does not rely on presenting oneself and one’s group as moral exemplars. An ethic of repentance reveals the opposite – that Christians are the greatest of all sinners. A witness based on repentance also has a constructive element to it – it leads the church community into a specific vocation or mission in society based on a conviction that Christians have been complicit in some form of social sin or injustice. This is what I attempt to show in “Part Three” of my book: church communities that are accepting responsibility for a particular sin, and, in a spirit of confession and repentance, are working to undo the injustice in often small but significant ways.

PLT: You’ve said much about Bonhoeffer already but why have him as a central piece of your work and not another theologian?

JMM: My answer is, in large part, autobiographical. The faith of my childhood, adolescence, and college years was shaped by conservative Presbyterian congregations and evangelical ministries. During college, I became troubled by a lot of aspects of my church upbringing, particularly by some of the primary theological emphases and claims that were made and reinforced throughout the evangelical subculture. I could express my frustration and anger over these messages and mindsets – much of which revolved around questions about the relationship of Christians to the rest of the world, that is, questions about salvation and about Christian concern (or lack of concern) for *this* world – but I didn’t have the theological or biblical

resources to construct alternative understandings. My faith in Jesus remained, as did the centrality of Jesus to my faith (which is a hallmark of evangelicalism), and so I lived into these questions with a posture of “faith seeking understanding,” as the classical Church Fathers called it. After college, I worked in an inner city hospitality house in Washington D.C., called the Southeast White House (which is one of the communities I write about in the book). There I read Bonhoeffer for the first time and was struck both by how central Jesus was to his theology and by how his writing from 1930s Germany was helping me articulate what upset me about North American evangelical Christianity at the turn of this century. Of course, many U.S. evangelicals have this experience with Bonhoeffer, especially after reading about cheap and costly grace in *The Cost of Discipleship*. But it wasn’t simply reading Bonhoeffer that was transformative; it was my experience in this inner city neighborhood and the questions that arose from that experience that led me to graduate work in theology. I remember standing in the parking lot of the Southeast White House wondering if I repeated the theological claims and messages I received from my evangelical upbringing if they would ring true – if they would *be* true – in that place. And I came to see that more often than not, they wouldn’t be, particularly messages I received about my life in relation to God’s sovereignty (implicit messages that God would make sure that things would always work out for me, that I wouldn’t, for example, have to worry about the problems people in Southeast DC experience like poverty) and messages about Christian “chosenness.” In some cases I came to see that the theological claims in and of themselves were false – they were just bad theology – and in some cases I realized that the claims were not untruthful, but they could become dangerous ways of thinking given my context of racial and economic privilege. In the racism course I teach here at Wartburg College, we discuss Traci West’s *Disruptive Christian Ethics* where she names this phenomenon. West talks about ways in which theological messages may conflate with racist societal messages when spoken in churches whose membership is predominantly white and wealthy, unintentionally reinforcing, for example, messages about superiority or “us versus them” mindsets. Bonhoeffer asks a question in prison that addresses this, not the white privilege but the ways the church has come to see itself as specially favored by God, a question that is central to my book: what does it mean, he asks, for the church to see ourselves not as privileged but as belonging wholly to this world? Bonhoeffer sees the church as called out – *chosen* for a particular mission – but not specially favored, be it morally or in terms of eternal destiny. If Christians are chosen, it is important to ask: chosen for what? Bonhoeffer’s answer is this: chosen to carry on the work of the incarnate and crucified God in the world, that is, chosen to be in solidarity with others, to suffer with and for others, as participation in God’s redemptive work in this world. I should mention that when I started reading Bonhoeffer while working in Southeast DC, I also started reading Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, and her witness also shaped my theological imagination. For Day, witness to Christ meant voluntary poverty, a giving up of one’s privilege, at least to the extent that one can (if you are white, for example, your privilege is always with you, even if you take on voluntary poverty). Bonhoeffer offers a different model from Day, although there are overlaps in their thinking. Bonhoeffer focuses on the responsibility that comes from

owning up to one's privilege, while also emphasizing the call to costly discipleship and the need to learn "the view from below," the perspective of those who are oppressed and maltreated. This view, as Clifford Green, Josiah Young, Reggie Williams, Charles Marsh and others have recognized, was profoundly shaped by his time in Harlem at Abyssinian Baptist Church and by experiences with his African American friend, Frank Fisher at Union Theological Seminary. The Southeast White House played a similar role in my life; it was my experience in this black inner city community that changed my perspective and led me to re-evaluate my privilege and the theological formation that arose out of that privilege.

To get back to your question, why Bonhoeffer? I see now, after completing the book, that it is helpful, strategically speaking, to center my constructive theology on Bonhoeffer's works. I am making an argument before fellow evangelicals and other Christians about what the gospel is – about who Jesus is, the relationship of the church to the world, the church's identity and mission – which means I want to be persuasive and influence Protestant thinking. Bonhoeffer is recognized by many US Protestants as a trustworthy thinker and an admirable Christian – he is seen as authoritative and someone we can listen to and trust. But when taken as a whole, Bonhoeffer's theology disrupts a lot of commonly held theological assumptions, especially those that North American evangelicals hold. We need this challenge, I believe, in order to witness to Christ in a non-triumphal way. We need to read more than just *Life Together* and *Discipleship* to understand the thrust of Bonhoeffer's theology and his understanding of what Jesus has accomplished. We need to reflect, for example, on claims he makes in *Ethics* that the whole world has been reconciled to God through Christ, that Christ, as Colossians 1 attests, has reconciled *all things* to himself. These are some of the theological claims I examine in the book, because they affect how we understand witness and the work of repentance. If Paul's inclusive claim in Colossians is true, what does that mean for our public witness? If it is true, how does it affect the content of the good news we proclaim in our words and actions? A posture that reflects this truly good news will not be, for example, a defensive stance against the world. It will be a posture of solidarity in sin and redemption. And this posture towards the world, I believe, might very well bring about real social transformation.

PLT: What are you hoping readers and/or churches will draw from this book?

JMM: I imagine that the readers who will be most on-board with my argument will be progressive evangelicals, perhaps readers who share some of the same frustrations haunting me in college and thereafter, but who, like me at the time, didn't have the theological resources to articulate an alternative perspective. I also think mainline Protestants and other Christians concerned with issues of faith and public life will be interested in this book and hopefully anyone interested in Bonhoeffer. It's an academic text, for sure, but I wrote it in hopes that it will be useful for the church. I am encouraged to see some pastors review it on blogs already; I hope that these conversations will find their ways into the pews, into bible studies, into mission committee meetings, etc.

Additionally, I am also aware that my audience will probably be white Protestants, like myself, that benefit in numerous ways from an unjust status quo. So, with this audience in mind, I wrote the book as an ecclesiology, inviting Protestants to rethink how we “do” church, so to speak. I want churches to reconsider what we are doing when we come together as a community, what our mission is as a community. I want Christians to think about organizing ourselves not around worship practices but around a sense of mission or vocation in the world, not because worship is not central to what it means to be a Christian but because this focus can, ironically, become insular and inward focused. If a church community is organized around a common sense of vocation in the world, then all that we do as a community – the bible studies, worship services, etc. – may stem from our common work in the world, providing concrete context to our study, prayer, and worship. A biblical passage that may serve as a guide is Isaiah 58 where God says through the prophet, “Is this not the fast that I chose?...to loose the bonds of injustice...to let the oppressed go free...is it not to share your bread with the hungry?” In other words, is this not what “religion” should be, what living out one’s faith in community should look like? Is this not central to the community, instead of a side concern? When Bonhoeffer critiques “religion” and calls for a “religionless Christianity,” he is critiquing in part bourgeois Christians who want to escape from responsibilities in this world, rather than being actively engaged in the messiness of our lived existence. I want us to rethink what it means to be a church community with this in mind.

PLT: You received your doctorate in Religious Studies from the University of Virginia, and worked closely with Charles Marsh, the director of the Project on Lived Theology. What is the connection between your book and lived theology?

JMM: When I was serving at the Southeast White House, I was drawn to the work of the Project on Lived Theology, particularly its emphasis on Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. as two quintessential lived theologians whose vocations encompass being both scholar/theologians and activist/pastors. I was drawn to the interconnection of the life of the mind and the life of activism because my own sense of vocation was beginning to form along these lines. I saw in myself both of these callings, with the two informing each other. The way the book is set up – the methodology – reflects this interconnection. The book draws on both philosophical theology (insight from Bonhoeffer as a theologian) and ethnographic method (insight from church communities exemplifying a disposition of repentance). I worked closely with the Project on Lived Theology throughout my graduate years helping plan and organize conferences, workgroups and institutes that would bring academics and practitioners together based on the conviction that we need one another to build just and peaceful communities. The book also reflects that conviction. In order to understand non-triumphal public witness, we need to turn not only to theologians like Bonhoeffer but also to the communities that exemplify non-triumphal witness like the Southeast White House in DC and the Eleuthero Community in Portland, Maine. This interconnection of theology and practice is central to the work of the Project. Likewise, I knew that if I were going to be a scholar, I’d have to do scholarship (particularly constructive theology) in a way that prioritizes

practice and the insights of ordinary Christians trying to be faithful to Jesus' call to follow him into the world. I knew I'd only grow as a Christian theologian, as a Christian person, by learning from and beside Christians who understand with Bonhoeffer "that one only learns to have faith by living completely in this world." By living, as he says, "in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities," and that this is "how one becomes a human being [and] a Christian."