In his famous letter to Reinhold Niebuhr in July 1939, hurriedly explaining his decision to return to Germany rather than remain in America for the coming war, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said:

I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people....Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice in security.\(^1\)

If he had survived the war, no book that Bonhoeffer might have written would have interested me more than one on the subject: “Christian civilization.” In his fragmentary but major work, *Ethics*, he stated the general principle: “Whatever humanity and goodness is found in this fallen world must be on the side of Jesus Christ.”\(^2\) But the specific interpretation of that principle to Germany would have been most intriguing. What was “Christian” about the German “civilization” at whose hands Bonhoeffer himself suffered much? Where would he have drawn the line between Christ and Anti-Christ in the twentieth century history of his own country? What was the good in German culture that was worthy of celebration even while it deluded many a German about the real depth of the Nazi evil? For any of us Christians, is there a proper “love of country” or does the history of patriotism in the twentieth century force all disciples of Jesus Christ to see “idolatry” scrawled across every national flag? If Bonhoeffer had lived to write books on these questions, he might have helped all his fellow Christians, inside their own respective countries, to write similar books for themselves. Prophetic protest against the evils in our national cultures is rare enough in our diverse church witnesses across the world; *faith-oriented* celebration of these same cultures is rarer yet. Bonhoeffer urged upon us a “theology of reality,”


i.e., a faith that enables the believer and the church to read the signs of particular times, to discern the difference of the spirits holy and unholy, and to follow the leading of the Spirit into the new future. Among other ways of describing such a viewpoint, one can say that it requires both a critical and an appreciative stance towards one’s own culture. To combine criticism with appreciation is to speak of actual, possible future directions in which a specific people may be called—by the God of Abraham, the God of Jesus—to go. It is to speak not merely of duty but of possibility. It is to accept the limits of a method of ethical reflection that Bonhoeffer exhibited in life and in word: “Understanding cannot be separated from the existence in which it has been won.” Only in their locality do Christian theology and ethics take their first steps towards universality. What other principle could be consistent with the locatedness of Abraham and Jesus?

The essay below attempts to summarize, in this one author’s reading, what the signs of our times say to the likes of us Christian Americans. This summation assumes that most readers have personal memories of this nation’s history from at least twenty years back; that few need a rehearsal of the historic events that we tag with words like the Civil Rights Movement, the Assassinations of the ’Sixties, the Vietnam War, Watergate, OPEC, Inflation, the Hostage Crisis, and the Nuclear Threat. Nor does any need to be reminded of the longer threads of American history that weave in and out of these recent traumatic events. The pattern of our history is a crazy-quilt of non-meaning for some of our fellow citizens. Others read it as meaning what the Christian must perceive as idolatry, pride and pretension. But Christian Americans too are supposed to search for coherent positive readings of their national history. They are forbidden, by their faith, to believe that anything will separate that very history from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. What then might be the connections, the conjunctions of the divine and the human in the life of the United States of America? I grant to all readers their right to resist the hubris apparent in this question. But the courage to ask it may have more warrant in faith than the timidity that refuses to ask it.

WHAT SAY THE SIGNS OF THE AMERICAN TIMES AND WHAT MUST CHRISTIANS SAY TO AMERICA?

I write in conscious recollection of the life, times, theology, and ethics of Bonhoeffer; and I write also under a single overarching perception that seems rightly rooted in my own faith and experience as an American: Americans must rediscover each other as they now discover the world. This theme presses in upon us from many directions at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties. I shall explore it below in three specific “musts,” three imperatives for the nation’s future and for the mission of the churches in this nation. Each is a compound mixture of faith long ago delivered to non-American saints, a matrix of cultural memory too complex to be unravelled here, a perception of economic-social-political reality that is quite disputable, and hopes for this nation’s future that are frustratable in the human short run. But three such prescriptions are one way whereby this somewhat faithful Christian might read his own American experience in terms of the directions he believes God means that experience to persist, to shift, and to change. A different essay, doubtless, will have to be written in 1990.

1. The classic America-bound refugee from oppressive society must soon become the new America-based pilgrim towards freeing society.

In the year of his second visit to America, Bonhoeffer observed that we are a nation of refugees and that as successful escapees from the hardships of other societies we inadvertently seem to claim “the right to avoid the final suffering, in order to be able to serve God in peace and quietness. But at the place of refuge the continuation of the struggle is no longer justified,”—at least not in the minds of the average American. “Social struggle” is not, in fact, a term that many descendants of the Pilgrims seem to understand. The individual’s freedom to make his or her own way across the frontiers of opportunity is the American Dream for many. But now, as at no time since the Puritans found themselves abandoning their Holy Community for the new entrepreneurial individualism of the Yankee, the events of recent American history now justify a new struggle. Even the westward movement of white civilization was a less individualistic effort than many American western movies would suggest; but the westward movement has stopped now with the Pacific Ocean, and signs are everywhere that Americans are having to grope their way towards new structures of community as discipline and salvation for the old individualism. In our churches, the resurgence of the language of unmediated personal salvation is no longer supported by the frontier social settings that once gave this very language its plausibility. Rodney Stark has recently correlated the lowest national incidence of church membership on our West Coast, with the highest incidence of membership in religious cults. Where the “Bible belt” ends in America, the “cult belt” apparently takes up. The bizarre events of Jonestown would be enough, one might think, to frighten any person from the ranks of a “new religion.” But the ordinary truth of biological and social science—no human is an island—is resurfacing at every turn in American society in these days. The suburban home, in which many found refuge in American urban areas, is no longer such a refuge. Gasoline costs too much, crime has its own mobility, inflation can wreck the mortgage payment system, and public tax policy can undermine the texture of justice that binds the inner city ghetto to the affluent perimeter towns of metropolis. We have a task ahead whose difficulty is unprecedented: we must learn anew to live together nationally as we learn for the first time to live with our worldwide neighbors. As Robert Bellah said in 1973, “A new sense of community may be a precondition if a viable human society is to continue on this continent.” His sense of history corresponds very closely to that of urban historian Sam Bass Warner, who sugges-

4Quoted by Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 564, from Bonhoeffer’s 1939 essay, “Protestantism Without Reformation.”

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of viable nationhood. Can the regions of the country dampen their historic competition enough to make the oil of Texas available at the same price to Texans and New Yorkers, the taxes of a limited federal budget divisible by the principles of justice as well as by the pressures of business lobbies? Are we to assume, with the new Reagan administration, that the taxpayers of Sioux Falls, S.D., have no obligation to help pay for mass transit in Los Angeles or the latter to pay for land conservation around Sioux Falls? These are political-economic versions of a question that is at once personal and social for Americans now: Not so much the pure biblical question, “Am I my neighbor’s keeper?” as the nagging questions of political-economic fact, “How expensive must my neighbor be to my pocketbook, my time, my attention, and my spirit?” Those who wait in our gas lines experience one form of the question; those asked by politicians to endure the indignity of a no-action response to national indignity in Teheran, experience another; and those who wonder how Mexico’s population, poverty, and oil will elbow their way into American affairs, yet another. It will take time, perhaps a long time, for these new facts to sink into the American mind. Our ancient, luxurious individualism will die hard.

We may hope that in dying it will not bring down to destruction many another nation. We are a people who can naturally admire the heroism of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who flung himself, in the company of so few colleagues, against the tyranny of a Hitler. We can enroll him in our own national roster of world heroes, and we can read his letters and papers from prison as a superb evocation of individual conscience under oppression. But we are poorly equipped to understand how basic to his heroism was a style of courage rooted in why he should say to a successor of Finkenwald, “Above all, one should go for walks with the brethren...or be with them in other ways;” or why, for the sake of a particular set of German “brethren” he should compulsively leave the American refuge for unknown dangers in their company. The works we Americans shall have to read most carefully, among those of Bonhoeffer that we tend to neglect, are not his writings on theology and political tyranny, but the writings on the church and “sociality.”

Through the church can some Americans rediscover each other and discover the world neighborhood? If by “church” we mean a relation among a people of faith that is a certain simultaneous political relationship, I can give my own “yes” to this question in a second imperative for our national future.

2. An organized church remains the unnegotiable requisite of political vision and political capacitation in crisis-prepared American society.


Here the meaning and the results of Bonhoeffer’s great turn towards the church in his 1932 experience of “becoming a Christian” remain an example rich with instruction for Americans, especially pietistic Americans. “It became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the church.” But to what church? And in what style of belonging? For our careful answering of these questions the German church experience of the ’thirties should occasion both anxiety and hope for American church people in the ’eighties. Twentieth
century totalitarianism has wrecked its havoc via the enforced privatization of human life. In this context the individualism of American culture is a standing invitation to totalitarianism. The power of individual conscience, over against the power of the state, everywhere from 1940 to the present day, grows pathetic. The pathos was never deeper than it was in the culture of the Nazi concentration camps. Surely, therefore, the gift of American culture to the world can hardly be its individualism, any more than the legacy of Bonhoeffer is his individual heroism.

Closer to worth giving away is another feature of our national life which Bonhoeffer identified with the culture of the refugee, the freedom of the society expressed in its voluntary associations. One risks pretentiousness in saying so; but the history of the Confessing Church in Germany reads, to this American eye, as the history of an associational church-theory that arrived too late in German national life to stand effectively against totalitarianism. The most realistic counter-confession here would be for the American to say of the Confessing Church, on behalf of the associational American church, “There but for the grace of God go we.” In years to come we shall see. Robert Bellah and Sam Bass Warner yearn for the day when to America will come a “distinctly American socialism.”10 My worry is over the day when we shall be faced with the danger of a distinctly American fascism. Such a fascism is likely to glory in the freedom it allows individual conscience. The “only” freedom it would curtail would be the freedom of groups to say, do, and protest as they wish. In curtailing the freedom of groups, such a fascism will adopt a slogan popular in youth culture of the later ’sixties: “It doesn’t make any difference what you do, so long as you don’t hurt anyone else.” The idea that individual action may avoid impact for good or evil on someone else is a convenient idea for many libertarians. But strange for them is the idea that freedom for persons depends empirically on freedom for groups. The watchword of the prospective tyrant in America will most certainly be: “By the destruction of their groups shall you control them.” And the watchword of those who resist tyranny must be: “Greater love have no individuals than this, that they lay down their lives for the integrity of some community over against the omnivorous state, or the omnivorous corporation.”

That is only the beginning of a communally-oriented political ethic; but the point to be stressed here is the interrelation of the churchly and the broadly social forms of that ethic. The society that institutionalizes individual freedom, state power, and resistance to all “intervening structures” is the totalitarian society. It conforms to the precedents and the lessons of all church history to insist that the church be one of these intervening structures. Indeed the secular relevance of the

9Letter from Finkenwalde, January 27, 1936, as quoted by Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 155.

church is its existence as a particularity that holds the promise of universality, the promise of the Gospel that exceeds the promise of any national culture.

Bonhoeffer was right to reproach the American church as enjoying too much formal freedom, too little freedom to preach the Gospel. That was the claim in 1930, even in 1939. But by 1944 the claim was more sweeping: not only must the Christian church demand of its society freedom to preach the Gospel and claim that freedom even when not granted, but the integrity of the very preaching requires churchly presence with the least of the nation’s citizens who are the brothers and sisters of the Lord. The church does not carry Jesus to “the middle of the village.”11
He is already standing there. Sociologically considered, the church is an intervening structure, but between what two poles does it intervene? Between the universal human community and the least of the candidates for that community, those who are now being cast out from the center to the edges of the political community. For Bonhoeffer this perception required his identification with the plight of the Jews in Hitler’s Germany. For American Christians it means witnessing to the Gospel by identifying with the needs of the poor and marginal members of our national society. Gospel faith has its distinctive witness in that intervention; and outside of such intervention—on behalf of social justice in the society at large—the integrity of faith, in any person or group that seeks to proclaim it, is questionable.

This latter statement matches closely the heart of contemporary Liberation Theology. The “truth” that Christians are called to “do in love” is a truth requiring the truthteller to identify with the needs of poor people. One does not understand this very truth, however, apart from this very identification; and this may be the most radical lesson of all from the life and thought of Bonhoeffer, at least as radical as the lesson that some Christians are learning from Marxism these days. Only those who struggle politically for justice for the poor, in their own societies, can truly understand the truth of the Gospel. The freedom of the church to preach the Gospel, therefore, is coterminous with its freedom to identify with the needs of the least of the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

The churches of America—and the rest of the world—need to understand this as empirically real truth and not only as truth in conformity with the Bible and other theological authority. A few years ago, for example, some colleagues and I undertook a project in survey research that involved us in testing the “fit” between the ethical beliefs of citizens in our urban area of North Carolina and their political behavior.12 We asked questions about the great American problems of the early 1970s: the Vietnam War, ecological responsibility, justice for the poor, racism, and sexism. We asked our respondents to tell us their beliefs about how government and other agencies should respond to these problems. We attempted a rough measurement of their political involvement in pursuit of these beliefs. And we sought in particular to discover the difference between people

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12A summary of this research can be found in Donald W. Shriver, Jr. and Karl A. Ostrom, Is There Hope for the City? (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), chapters 5-7.

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with strong and people with weak beliefs about justice in American society. After much study, we concluded that people with strong beliefs about social justice are likely to have three interrelated characteristics: (1) a self-conscious philosophy, often a religious faith, that called for certain changes in the human world; (2) a group of companions whose relations to each other support the individual in his or her holding of such convictions; and (3) an ongoing experience of struggle and conflict in public life, in a political party or voluntary association or other action-group united for a public rather than a private purpose.

Political capacity, we found, is a complex product of personal, interpersonal, and public relationships. Seventy-five percent of Americans have little such capacity, judged by their behavior. Seventy-five percent of church members, the same. But in the remaining 25%, whether
church members or not, there remains a cluster of people enacting a lifestyle of unsatisfied ethical aspiration for their society, the support of some close friends and companions, and political effort on behalf of their aspirations. *Vision, friendship, politics:* one seamless robe of mutual reinforcements that apparently deliver some Americans from a sense of vulnerability to the cold winds of social change. In our research we found that the most powerful corollary of sustained morale and morality is political experience itself. Americans who have high aspirations for justice in national and world society, who lack friends and colleagues for nourishing such aspirations, and who do not actually participate in public life, turn out to be a vulnerable lot. Some are typical liberal individualists. They brood over the injustice of their society in lonely isolation. They tend more than most to suffer from psychosomatic illnesses such as stomach ulcers and insomnia. They worry about politics, but they do not do anything in politics. The same generalizations can be made about many church members who worship regularly, and study the Bible, but who seldom cross a bridge into the public arena with likeminded companions to engage in conflict with un-likeminded political opponents. The least demoralized folk in the community are the people most actively caught up in the political process. In sum, those most exposed to the full panoply of evil in the society are somehow those most strengthened to pit their energies against it. Bonhoeffer said precisely the same thing: “We in our time must say...that before a man can know and find Christ he must first become righteous like those who strive and suffer for the sake of justice, truth, and humanity.”13 “Christianity which withdraws from the world falls victim to the unnatural and the irrational, to presumption and self-will.”14 It is an empirical truth, the secular-political confirmation of what it means, in our time, to lose one’s life, to become a disciple, and to do so in the company of other disciples fully ready to pay the cost of discipleship.

*The church is necessary for the integrity of the world: but the world is equally necessary for the integrity of the church.* If this be secular Christianity, well and good. But a better name might be “politically universal Christianity,” for the word “secular” still retains its old Latin connotations of *saeculum*, belonging to an age or era, therefore narrow and limited in its scope, less than universal or universally hu-


man.15 Thus stated, a call from Bonhoeffer to the American church is a call to abandon secular, compartmentalized religion for universalizable public political witness, in the midst of public life. Thus stated, the glory of the free church in America is its freedom for public life rather than mere freedom from governmental control. From the narrow—shall we say “secular”?—confines of prison he himself wrote:

Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the work of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world....It is not for us to prophesy that day (but the day will come) when men will once more be called so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it.16
Bonhoeffer did not stumble upon this thought in a jail cell. He merely had time there to think it and to write it down. Indeed his sense of the evil of Nazism must have grown from childhood on as he moved from the fringes to the center of national and international society. The more closely he identified himself with politicized resistance to that evil, the more certain was his knowledge of why it had to be resisted. Political perception and faith-grounded ethical perception grew together. To be sure, the ancient Biblical distinctions between human kingdoms and God’s Kingdom remain perennially relevant to the prophetic witness of the churches and its politicized members. Two kingdoms remain and much political debate among Christians as to what the will of God really is. But the insulation of

15A fine exposition of this view of “secularism” can be found in Langdon Gilkey, How the Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Itself (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 52-53. Gilkey insists that there are certain “logical pressures” in Christian faith that keep us from identifying any time or cultural place with the “holy” or universal relations implicit in that faith. Such identification is a danger in much Bonhoeffer interpretation, he says. The real danger in religion is its tendency to separation from the whole of existence. Thus, The separated world of religion is...no longer “holy,” for its Lord is closeted in too small a realm....Correspondingly, if religion becomes merely the world, it, too, becomes too parochial, private, and special, but in a different sense, reflecting now only the customs and conventions of a special society. The religious or holy, then, is properly not a category either totally separated from the secular or completely identified with it. Rather it is that which relates us to the source of our life and the goal of its meaning, and thus that which conditions and ultimately directs all our secular existence (Ibid., p. 53).

He goes on to observe:

Conservative Protestantism maintains its transcendence only in the forms of a fading dogma and a biblical literalism irrelevant to man’s concrete life. Thus where important decisions are actually made, conservative Protestantism has in most cases capitulated to culture. And liberalism, in turn, has in itself no structural elements that can mediate transcendence and judgment (p. 54).

Bonhoeffer’s faith and life, in this framework, was neither conservative nor liberal, nor was it “secular.” I have always felt that instead of the phrase “secular Christianity” or “religionless Christianity,” he would have been closer to expressing the real thrust of his theology of mundigkeit, if he had steadily focused his interpretation of that latter concept on the meaning of incarnation, providence, and the works-of-the-Spirit in our time. The Calvinist “world of particular providences” seems precisely to be Bonhoeffer’s “world.” In this context, the ethic of deputyship and historical responsibility make abundant, classic Christian sense.

16Letters and Papers (“Thoughts on Baptism”), p. 300.

the one from the other kingdom and a paradoxical relation between them must be resisted. I am convinced that, had Bonhoeffer lived, he would have written a long new chapter in Lutheran ethics on this theme, consisting of a major revision of Luther’s two-kingdom theory that was the essence of Bonhoeffer’s own quarrel with both the German Christians and the Confessing Church on grounds of his experience in the Resistance.17 The point is that the proper mixture of faith and politics can only be discovered by political participants, and they must discover if in company with all sorts and conditions of secular companions. Faithfully political discipleship is the adventure of a small society in a larger one in pursuit of one larger yet.

In the Civil Rights Movement, the antiwar movement, or the work of political parties, many American Christians of the ’sixties and ’seventies learned some of this truth, even without learning to verbalize it. Some began to learn it inside the politics of the church itself; they learned not to be afraid of human conflict, compromise, varieties of human opinion and need—generic
components of political experience. Those who least learned it, one hastens to add, were those most victimized by the class and racial exclusions of American church life. Here is the weakest empirical part of any claim for a *preparatio politicus in ecclesia Americana*. That preparation is most likely in the “public church”—the church that comes closest to opening its doors truly to “all sorts and conditions” of human beings. In America, the enemies of such a public church are many, including the residential patterns and economic structures of our cities that predetermine the maps of our ecclesiastical demography. But tensions with this form of church secularity arise inside and between many parts of our churches, and nowhere more truly than in churches like the one Bonhoeffer liked to visit in New York’s Harlem. What he sensed in the Abyssinian Baptist Church there, my colleague James Cone still finds in the Black churches of America:

> It is still one of the very few places that Blacks can go where they feel that their dignity as persons is affirmed. Janitors, maids, and especially the elderly are in charge. This is probably the only place in this society where Blacks really know that they are somebody. One can experience their recognition of their worth as persons, not only in the Sunday worship but especially in the various business meetings of the church. ¹⁸

> Well does Clifford Green interpret Bonhoeffer as believing that “the congregation is the place where the anthropological problem of the autonomous individual can be overcome.” ¹⁹ But most Black American Christians long ago were spared a need for that sophisticated way of putting it: “autonomous individualism” was never their style of church life. In this sense they have long been the pioneers of a true ecumenism in America. As on other occasions in church history, a part of the church foreign to one’s native tradition appears here on one’s own horizon as an embodied vision of the authentic church. In its own finite way, the Black churches of America have been something of our Confessing Church;

³⁹Green, p. 110.

and many of us have learned from them not to despair of the church as an agent of God’s will in our world. They are, so to use a Bonhoeffer concept, one of God’s peculiar deputies in our midst.

But there is another peculiarity here in the surmise that the Lord of history has something to teach American white Christians through American Black Christians: the peculiar church contribution to politics in a world where the word often describes “alienation,” always implies conflict, and sometimes suggests what most hinders subgroups of humans from affirming their community with each other. In the nineteen-eighties, what does the American church have to contribute to the achievement of community between the aliens and strangers of earth?

³. *The struggle against cheap universalism must quicken among us. New costly arts of reconciliation must soon be learned, and none more quickly than the art of combining justice with forgiveness.*
The U.S.A. was founded by people who, in retrospect, failed to reckon with the glibness of their dream of “one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” A nation of refugees, all sorts and conditions of humans, bound into one political community: from the first it was a vision “more honoured in the breach than the observance.” Seldom was it more dishonoured than when some principle or policy for justice turned out to be justice for some at the expense of exploitation for others: a nation of aliens that turns upon the alien; an enlightened universalism that produces abhorrence of strangers; a “free” society that has its own history of persecution; a nation of strangers prematurely at home with each other to the exclusion of other late-arriving strangers.

In these perspectives on American history, we are better tutored by some of our politicians than by others. Robert Bellah contrasts Lincoln as the best exemplar of a politician with a religious sense-of-the-political with Richard Nixon, whom he nominates as one of the worst. At his triumphant inauguration for a second term as president in 1972, reported in the New York Times, a “concert work using the text of President Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address was dropped from the official program...because the [Nixon] Inaugural Committee reportedly considered the words embarrassing in today’s context.” Here are the embarrassing words:

Both [sides in this war] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not that we be not judged....With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

This was about as close as any American politician has ever come to expressing a faith that subjects the nation’s moral pretensions of justice to divine judgment; its individualistic culture to the claims of the oppressed; and its sectional selfishness to the claims of, not only peace in the nation, but peace in the world.

This classic American political struggle is far from over. New forms of the struggle have come to us in the ’seventies, and all those forms will intensify in the ’eighties: non-Christian religions will assert their integrity over against a nation they deem the leader of the “Christian bloc” in the world. Ayatollahs and the leaders of other religions will shout “infidel” to the Americans. The poor of Africa will find yet louder voices to protest against the presumption of an economy that digests a third of the earth’s natural resources. In the name of God or Marx or

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21In Richey and Jones, pp. 260-261.
Mao, the world of other nations will tell us that they refuse to become captive to our political, economic, and cultural power. Meantime, similar voices will rise in our national life, as the subcultures of our nation loose their tongues to claim their freedom to speak Spanish, their right to share in our national wealth, and their ability to remain free from subjection to the bureaucratic state. The unnegotiable human “other” will rise up with new political voice; the transcendent will appear in the stranger.

And what might the American church have to do with the achievement of a new birth of community between the strangers of earth, even the American earth? On this, from Bonhoeffer’s life and work, we Americans have some eloquent clues. They are all clues to the Christian churches’ potential contribution to the building of a pluralistic national culture. I do not see that their relevance is limited to America:

—The stranger in our midst has always been the near approach of the One to whom Jesus prayed. “Keep open the boundary” to the neighbor “furthest from you,” Bonhoeffer pleaded. What the white European refugees of old failed so often to recognize—for example in relation to the stubborn tribalism of the “native American”—it is high time for their descendants to recognize. In the cultural stranger, the God of Jesus invites the traditional to be reconciled with the untraditional. Keep open the boundary—to your brother the atheist, your sister the Communist, your newest neighbor the refugee from a foreign tyranny your own politics helped to support. In them murmur the overtures, not of a secular community, but a global community struggling to be, struggling to become global by becoming local. Peter Berger took his stand with that struggle when he recounted how, as another postwar refugee from Europe to America, he perceived the cultural pluralism of New York City as a “signal of transcendence.”

Wherever human beings are liberated from...narrowness to wider horizons of life, thought, and imagination, there is foreshadowing of the final liberation that is to come.

Nothing less than that liberation was going on in the prison cells of Tegel and Flossenburg, where Bonhoeffer experienced a strange new community with atheists, Communists, and ordinary criminals.

And this suggests a second penultimate principle for the Christian church’s reformation of nationalism in our time:

23Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 228.

—The only future nationalist culture tolerable to faith is one that practices hospitality to pilgrims from other cultures. We are far from dreaming so pluralistic a dream in most parts of the world. The universalist rhetoric of the Americans about offering hospitality to all the world’s poor and oppressed is easy to qualify or deny from knowledge of our history; but other loud universalisms of our time—Marxist, Islamic—have their historic embarrassments, too. How painful to be in China in January, 1979, to read the great slogan posters, “We have friends all over the world,” and to come back to headlines about invasions and preparations for invasion...
across the Socialist borders of China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and the U.S.S.R. Who in the world has a key that will unlock a door to world-wide human community? Those who have promoted the provincialisms of our time, masquerading as universal, have reason to repent of their answers to the questions. The church has more reason yet. The Christian faith has a single advantage here: it points to One before whom to repent is also to hope. It invites us to pray for our own nation, that it may enjoy the peace of strangers who once were afar off but now are brought near. *Can an ecumenical vision of the church infiltrate the politics and the culture of nations?* It is the really new frontier inside all nations where the church has an uneasy home. And there is one more peculiar contribution the church may have to humanity’s crossing of that frontier:

—*The highway to ultimate human reconciliation consists of interlocked stepping stones of judgment and forgiveness.* Early in the *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer has a paragraph on the difference between forgiveness as an uncertain hope for the “historic life of the nations” in contrast to the certain possibility of forgiveness in the life of the church. The passage sounds to me like that of a Lutheran on his way towards shaking off the shackles of a two-kingdom theory but not quite succeeding. In this he mightly resembles Reinhold Niebuhr.

...forgiveness within history can come only when the wound of guilt is healed, when violence has become justice, lawlessness has become order, and war has become peace....Man’s first concern must be to resist injustice and to call the offenders to account for their guilt.25

Here again, he was on the way, perhaps, to a view less hobbled by two-realm thinking, more consistent with Christ’s presence in the world. Liberation theology stands in some similar danger, I think, of adopting the Christ who brings justice to the poor at the expense of neglecting the Christ who liberates us all from sin and mutual alienation. In a recent article Professor Haddon Willmer of Leeds University comes closer to corresponding with political reality and with the reality of Christ in the form of *Realpolitik* when he says:

> It is a failure in historic Christianity that it has not understood its faith well enough to resist more strongly the tendency to treat forgiveness and justice as mutually contradictory, as though forgiveness meant an escape from justice. Whether it is seen as giving each man his due or as what is revealed in God’s good will and deed in creating and redeeming the world, forgiveness is the very heart of justice.

> Because *community* among humans is a component and a condition of justice, the sociality of the human requires just forgiveness and forgiving justice.

> A system of forgiveness is one that can be worked by people with the common

> 25*Ethics*, p. 54.
own perversions? That is a question...which politics can only escape by low-flying depoliticizing pragmatism....The powerful have the responsibility of using their power forgivingly. It robs them of many common justifications for exploiting those over whom they have power....

There are burdens for the weak and the poor also. They are not to be asked stoically to ignore their sufferings nor to try to pretend that right is not on their side. Forgiving will...[enable] them not to be determined beyond measure by the offence done to them. It will free them from the toils of the politics of retaliation....Where the offended refuse to give up the politics of grievance the past keeps everyone in its grip. Colour in the USA, class in Britain, and political sectarianism in Ireland operate thus....If those who have grievances cannot find it in themselves to forgive, they will never have the freedom of vision and action necessary to make a different society.26

Abraham Lincoln would have understood these words. I think Bonhoeffer might have agreed with them, while Reinhold Niebuhr might have remained skeptical. But there is, in my mind, no more striking correspondence between Gospel truth and political truth than this; and no political discipline waits so necessarily for American Christians in the years just ahead of us. We Americans live in a time when we will feel the pressures for justice in world politics in unprecedented intensity. We shall hear ourselves rightly, wrongly, and regularly accused of evils suffered at our hands around the world. In all this we shall be tempted by our ancient dialectic of “humility and pretension.”27 We shall have much opportunity to indulge in superficial guilt and “low-flying depoliticizing” pragmatic repentance. We shall be best served, however, by a church that announces to us the forgiveness of all our sins, public and private. Only so will we have “the freedom of vision and action necessary to make a different society.” Only so will we sustain our hope of becoming a society where all refugees might be at home, no culture is ultimately estranged, and no sinner is permanently banned. Such a society is the best part of democratic humanism, the nearest national analogue to the Una Sancta, the point in national culture where the ecumenical Christians call for a “better secularity”28 by calling for the next steps toward a culturally open boundary for national community.

That good but leaky ship, the church, has a way to sail before it leads the nations into its final port, the community of the nations. Bonhoeffer was “someone who encourages men to sail quickly out of harbors that have silted up”29—racist, exclusivist, provincial harbors every one. The communion of saints heads for the community of the human, but the course lies across the history of each nation. “What is God doing to us and with his Church in America?”30 Let us hope, Dietrich, that he is doing something like this, as he stands there, in the midst of us all.

27A phrase applied to American church history by Bonhoeffer in his essay, “Protestantism Without Reformation” as quoted by Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 564.
28Ethics, p. 65.
29Bethge’s phrase, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 794.
30Quoted from ibid., p. 564.