

## ABSTRACT

Keeping Silent: The Ethical Place of Silence in Theological Communication

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Although many people understand silence as a passive act, I argue that silence is a powerful practice that the church must properly integrate into its communication in order to speak truthfully. To do so, I investigate the ways in which silence can be a form of power. Properly used, silence can be one way to practice nonviolent resistance against violent communicative structures. Additionally, practicing silence is one way for humans to share in the life of God through the practice of listening. Yet, the church has not always properly used silence. The church has frequently misused the power of silence, both silencing those who should speak and remaining silent when speech was necessary, two practices that require the church to repent. Finally, I conclude by arguing that understanding silence as a way of communicating living truth provides the resources by which the church can properly integrate silence into its communicative practice, grounded in the practiced life of ecclesial communities.

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KEEPING SILENT: THE ETHICAL PLACE OF SILENCE IN THEOLOGICAL  
COMMUNICATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Silence is a dimension of human communication that receives relatively little consideration compared to the attention given to speech, despite several recent monographs on theological silence.<sup>1</sup> This lack of consideration may result from a view of silence as an essentially passive, inactive state. However, this view neglects the way in which silence is almost always communicative and can be an exercise of power. Although silence's meaning may be more indeterminate and harder to decipher than that of speech, its conveyance of meaning is essential to understanding the communicative space. Silence can possess a great number of meanings, ranging from the stunned silence of someone experiencing grief to the expectant silence of an audience before the first note of a symphony to the tragic silence of the young rape victim whose testimony is doubted. Each of these silences expresses meanings determined largely by surrounding stories, and one must appropriately attend to each silence in order to interpret it properly.

In the modern world, silence is becoming an increasingly rare phenomenon. With the advent of online spaces into which ordinary people are able to pour their speech, silence becomes an increasingly radical choice. Noise pollution grows to record levels such that it becomes difficult to find a place free from human sounds, whether the chatter

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<sup>1</sup> For example:

Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (New York, New York: Viking, 2013).

Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014).

of a cell phone or the passing of cars on a freeway. The agrarian poet Wendell Berry captured the modern inability to find silence in this short poem:

Best of any song  
is bird song  
in the quiet, but first  
you must have the quiet.<sup>2</sup>

In this poem, Berry describes quiet as not an absence, but rather a necessary condition for song. Without silence, there is no true speech, shutting down communication. Silence must be kept, with individuals setting aside space for it to occur, stopping speaking to create silence so that communication may exist.

This thesis is an attempt to call attention to the quiet silences of human existence. Particularly, I explore the ethical dimensions of practices of silence for the Christian's ethic of communication. The overall argument advanced is that the church must recognize the power of silence and faithfully incorporate it into its communicative life in order to express the living truth of God. It can be divided into two primary sections. The first two chapters are arguments for the power of silence, while the final two chapters consider the use and misuse of silence within the Christian church.

Chapter One explores the possibility of the use of silence as a form of nonviolent resistance to power structures that result in the oppression and silencing of others. It argues that silence is one way of refusing the terms of the dominant discourse, and that it can thereby be an avenue of resistance open to oppressed individuals. The power expressed by this form of silence is not the worldly kind of power that imposes one's will upon the other, but rather the power seen in the vulnerability of Christ. This

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<sup>2</sup> Berry, *A Timbered Choir*, 207.

nonviolent form of power is built upon God's eschatological promise to set the world right, vindicating the cause of the oppressed.

Chapter Two concerns the relationship between silence and hearing, arguing that silent listening is one way in which the church shares in the life of God. This argument is dependent upon understanding God as the one who perfectly listens to the speech and silence of all individuals. When privileged Christians fall silent, they are able to properly listen to the voices of the marginalized, thereby sharing in the non-coercive power of God, who, by silent listening, hears the marginalized person into the ability to speak. In this way, silence is a form of power by the space that it creates for the other to speak, although this power is one that depends upon care for the other.

Chapter Three considers the church's misuse of the power of silence, both in the silencing of others and the church's silence in the face of injustice. Through an appeal to Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, I argue that the church must repent of such misuse of silence in order to move towards a more integrated ethic of communication. This misuse of silence is a moral failing of the church that must be acknowledged and taken into account when formulating a constructive ethic of communication that properly integrates silence and speech.

Chapter Four attempts to construct a positive role for silence within the church's communicative practice. This positive role depends upon an understanding of truth as a living reality within the church. Therefore, it is impossible to create an ethical matrix by which to determine when to speak and when to keep silent because such a system would result in only an approximation of truth. The practice of communicative ethics must be grounded in the concrete community of the church, within which one speaks and remains



silent with respect to one's social role. These social roles must involve a relationship to others who equally have a responsibility to faithfully speak and keep silence. In this way, the ecclesial community forms the basis for a Christian's ethic of communication, teaching him or her to properly use silence in the care of the other.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Power of Silence: Silence as Resistance

Various authors have problematized silence as necessarily connected with the forced silencing of others. Sara Maitland, in her book that positively discusses silence, details the response of her friend: “There is no silence without the act of silencing, some one having been shut up... Silence is oppression and speech, language, spoken or written is freedom... silence is a place of non-being, a place of control... all silence is waiting to be broken.”<sup>1</sup> This provocative quote reveals a negative understanding of silence in which silence comes about only through the will of the strong enforcing silence upon the weak. However, this chapter explores an alternative understanding of silence as itself a form of power, not necessarily the denial of power named by silencing. I argue that silence can be a powerful force when used as a form of nonviolent resistance against oppression. By considering the category of resistant silences theologically, one sees silence a form of power built around vulnerability rather than coercive force.

First, I will distinguish between silencing and resistant silence, arguing that silence is not necessarily connected with silencing. Then, I will explore the way in which silence can be a form of power through its use in resistance to unjust power structures. I will ground this form of resistance in the practice of nonviolence, which is made possible for the Christian through the eschatological promises of God. Finally, I will consider objections to using silence as a form of resistance, arguing that the vulnerability of

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<sup>1</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 28.

silence is not an essentially negative trait and that silence is not reducible to only another form of speech.

In setting forth silence as a form of power, it is important to distinguish between silence and silencing. Silencing is often a form of oppression, while resistant silences are a form of power. Not all silences are a form of silencing. Although silencing does entail silence, this silence is imposed upon an individual, preventing their ability to speak, rather than a silence of resistance, which one would take upon oneself. There are at least two ways of characterizing the problem of silencing—deprivation of agency and communicative disablement. In considering these two problems of silencing, I show that resistant silence does not fall prey to either of these problems, but instead is a powerful means of fighting oppression.

One way of characterizing the problem of silencing is that it deprives an individual of agency. Nikita Dhawan argues that silencing creates “an absence of agency,” and therefore an inability to influence the world.<sup>2</sup> She thinks that the problem of silencing is felt most acutely in modern liberal democracies because “speech is primarily seen as politically enabling” due to a “clear identification between power and voice.”<sup>3</sup> For Dhawan, silencing is a moral wrong because of the way in which speech is intimately connected with an individual’s ability to engage in political and social discourse. Such a position privileges the role of speech in the political process, providing little room for the exercise of silence. If the democratic process is conceived of as primarily a battleground of opposing ideas, then it seems that one without a voice would be unable to influence the

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<sup>2</sup> Dhawan, “Hegemonic Listening and Subversive Silences,” 49.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

political society in which he or she lives. However, I object to her necessary connection between power and voice. If silence is one way in which an individual can exercise agency upon the world through resistance, it seems that the critique of silence as necessarily silencing would be defeated with respect to the problem of agency. Additionally, this powerful conception of silence would call into question ideas of political discourse based primarily upon speech, an idea that I will return to at the close of this chapter.

This connection of silencing with the deprivation of agency is open to criticism because it depends upon understanding speech as active upon the world. Another way of understanding the moral wrong of silencing is in its prevention of communication. Ishani Maitra advances such a position. Instead of understanding speech as essentially connected with power, she sets forth a moral argument against “communicative disablement” based upon the “deprivation of benefits of speech.”<sup>4</sup> For Maitra, these benefits of speech primarily concern the ability to express oneself clearly. This conception of silencing implicitly holds that silence cannot be a form of communication. To disconnect silence from this conception of silencing, one must argue that silence provides an avenue for communication. I will argue that at least some forms of silence can be communicative, although the silence of a silenced individual may be a noncommunicative silence. Not all silences need be understood as noncommunicative. It is possible that silence can fulfill an important role in communication, particularly in communicative environments where words no longer properly communicate by saying something beyond speech. In this way, I advocate a model of communication that does

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<sup>4</sup> Maitra, “Silencing Speech,” 331.

not depend on speech, but rather allows silence to assume its proper role in the communicative process.

These two characterizations of silencing elaborate the potential connection between silencing and the practice of silence. Silence as a form of resistance answers the objection that silence is necessarily connected with silencing because it does not fall prey to these two problems of silencing. Instead, resistant silences are a form of noncoercive power and nonviolent communication. The practice of a resistant silence exercises power in such a way that it does not result in the silencing of others, instead protesting the development of a violent communicative sphere.

Silence can be a form of resistance because it allows the oppressed to work within the power structures available to them. James C. Scott, in his study of the way in which oppressed groups subvert the power structures of a dominant group, argues that the “dissembling of the weak in the face of power” is to be expected because the weak cannot enter fully into the dominant discourse for fear of retribution.<sup>5</sup> He argues that the study of oppressed groups must involve consideration of the “hidden transcript,” which “represents discourse—gesture, speech, practices—that is ordinarily excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power.”<sup>6</sup> This hidden transcript is generated both as a form of offstage dialogue amongst peers in an oppressed group and in the public transcript through ironic acts of subversion. Scott argues that much study of oppressed groups ignores this hidden transcript, thereby generating a view of the oppressed as more complicit in their own oppression than the hidden transcript would

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<sup>5</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

suggest. However, this hidden transcript is by nature difficult to perceive because it must remain hidden from the view of those in power who frequently control the official publications of the oppressed groups. Scott considers many ways in which the hidden transcript may be inserted into the public transcript, primarily through various uses of irony, but does not in this book consider the way in which silence could form a part of the hidden transcript.

However, I argue that silence should be considered part of the hidden transcript and thereby understood as both an expression of agency and a form of communication. An oppressed person may have the option of remaining silent in discourse with a powerful individual. Such silence could be interpreted by the powerful person as tacit support for their actions, but, in an ironic register, the silence could communicate resistance to oppressive communicative structures. Jesus's responses before Pilate, rejecting the terms of the questions offered to him, is an example of speaking in this ironic register to which I will return below. Although the term transcript seems to imply a form of speech, Scott's definition includes practices as well as speech and should include the practice of silence. In a particularly oppressive regime, silence could be the only form of resistance available to an oppressed individual. Therefore, the only contribution allowed for the oppressed to express the hidden transcript may be silence. Yet, one cannot properly interpret a hidden transcript of silence by reducing its role to that of speech. Instead, silence plays a unique role in resistance because of the way that it undermines discourse. In this way, the hidden transcript of silence does not combat the dominant transcript by offering a competing transcript, but rather by subverting it.

A Christian practice of silence as resistance would share many of the characteristics of these secular silences. Sarah Coakley details the way in which she witnessed this form of resistant silence through leading a group of inmates in the practice of silent prayer, arguing that “shared silence in peace and solidarity in the context of a jail is possibly the most subversive act of resistance to the jail’s culture of terrorization and violence that one might devise.”<sup>7</sup> She describes this form of silent prayer as “empowering” to the inmates in contrast to her theology students who thought that “silence must inevitably mean being silenced.”<sup>8</sup> Coakley traces this difference in attitude to the context in which the two groups lived. In the jail, the guards controlled the dominant discourse and cacophony was normative. Silence was an activity that resisted the normal culture of the jail, a culture that worked to demean the inmates. By practicing silence in competition with the dominant discourse of violence in the jail, the inmates were able to provide a peaceful alternative to normally violent discourse. This description of silence as a form of resistance in the jail depends upon understanding speech as not necessarily constitutive of communication. Instead, speech can be used to shut down communication between individuals. In the context of a jail, speech serves only to reinforce the existing power dynamics of the space. Speech keeps distance between the correctional officers and the inmates. In this context, silence is a form of vulnerability that opens up space for communication. Thus, silences of resistance can become a form of communication that overcomes the silencing cacophony of speech that is not intended to communicate. This role of vulnerable silence in opening up space for communication

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<sup>7</sup> Coakley, “Jail Break,” 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

mirrors the role of quiet in Berry's poem from the introduction. In much the same way that quiet is a necessary part of hearing bird song, vulnerable silence within a noisy space is a necessary component of true communication.

Silence as resistance may appear to be a concession to an oppressive environment. For Scott, it seems that the speaking of the hidden transcript would be more powerful than the subversive forms of resistance available to the oppressed. If oppressed individuals were able to insert their views into the public transcript, then hidden transcripts would no longer be required. Silence in this view seems a second-rate form of resistance that one should abandon if one has the opportunity to enter the public transcript. However, Dhawan suggests one way in which silence may be a more effective form of resistance than speech:

Silence here [as a form of resistance] is a practice of confrontation, a "counter-discourse." It can function as a variation in the eternal repetition of discourses by causing a rupture in language, a subversion that turns language against itself. It is not just that one is silenced and thereby rendered invisible; rather, one can strategically choose to be silent by boycotting discourses, by refusing to participate in them. Ironically, dominant discourses require counter-discourses to continually reinforce and strengthen their hegemony.<sup>9</sup>

This account of silence is one in which silence can be an effective form of resistance by undermining dominant discourses through refusing to participate in them. One is able to protest oppression by refusing to become implicated in discourse that oppresses others. Her description of silence as a voluntary form of resistance does not fall prey to the charges of silencing above. This form of silence is not destructive of agency because it is freely chosen, and this form of silence is communicative of rejection of the dominant discourse. This characterization of resistant silences endues silence with power because

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<sup>9</sup> Dhawan, "Hegemonic Listening and Subversive Silences," 58.



of its ability to undermine discourse, changing the terms by which individuals interact. Silence rejects the normative counter-discourses of oppressed-oppressor communication, refusing to provide the necessary counter-discourse of speech that makes oppressive discourses self-perpetuating. The person practicing silence is not compelled to enter into the dominant discourse when the opportunity presents itself, but can continue to refuse to enter the discourse altogether, thereby refraining from becoming complicit in the oppression of others. The power exercised by the refusal of the terms of discourse does not depend upon forcing one's voice to be heard, but rather upon subverting the dominant oppressive narrative through one's own practice of silence. Silence works to undermine speech-based counter-discourses that may only perpetuate the existing patterns of power relations.

Silence must be freely chosen in order to be a silence of resistance instead of a silencing. While considering the work of Stuart Grassian on the way in which the silence of solitary confinement has negative effects upon prisoners, Maitland notes that in her own practice of silence she “had had the same experiences Grassian lists, but [she] had enjoyed them and they were therefore different experiences.” She traces this difference in reaction to silence to “whether or not it was freely chosen.”<sup>10</sup> Maitland understands the key distinction between a positive silence and a negative one to be whether the silent subject chose to keep silence or whether silence was forced upon them. Therefore, it is important to not give the silence of the oppressed a spiritual meaning if the oppressed did not choose to practice this silence. Not all silences ought be interpreted as silences of resistance because doing so risks minimizing the silencing of others. Part of the power of

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<sup>10</sup> Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 92.

a silence of resistance derives from the oppressed person's decision to remain silent in defiance of the dominant cultural discourse.

Rowan Williams also argues that these resistant silences depend upon the freedom of the one who remains silent. He elaborates this freedom of choice by arguing that silences of resistance are "what we could call achieved silences: they are silences with a history behind them of free decision and of pre-occupation with a vision that is most actively desired."<sup>11</sup> This quote presupposes Williams's idea that a particular moment of silence gains meaning through its frame. For Williams, a silence's "history matters."<sup>12</sup> A resistant silence is one that an individual practices as a particular response to a historical situation of injustice. In order to understand a resistant silence, one must understand the particular instance of injustice in response to which silence is practiced. Williams's characterization of these silences as "achieved" shows the difference between a silence of resistance and a silencing. Silencing is not something aimed at, but rather usually something to be avoided. In this passage, Williams also gestures towards eschatology by arguing that resistant silences are kept towards a particular end, one in which silencing is overcome.

This understanding of silence as historically framed prevents the spiritualization of all silences because resistant silences are only effective if undertaken in the proper way, in response to a particular issue. Williams sees Cordelia's silence before King Lear's demands that she express her love as an example of a historically framed silence of resistance. Lear, at the opening of the play, demands that his three daughters express

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 178.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

their love for him in flattering terms in order to decide how to apportion his kingdom. Although Goneril and Regan flatter Lear in order to gain inheritance, Cordelia refuses Lear's demand of flattery. Williams argues that "her silence is significant as a protest against the language she is being forced to speak: it is not that her silence as such is somehow a token of 'transcendent' meaning. It gains significance only from what it specifically denies."<sup>13</sup> This description of a particular silence adds weight to Williams's argument because one is able to see the particular history to which Cordelia is responding. Rather than an uncontextual silence, Cordelia's silence gains meaning in her refusal to enter into the false discourse that Lear attempts to impose upon his daughters. Rather than engaging either positively or negatively in the dominant discourse established by Lear, Cordelia uses silence to undermine and unsettle the dominant discourse, though her resistant silence is not enough to avert the tragedy that ensues. Thus, by understanding silence as importantly historical, one is able to avoid the imposition of meaning upon silence that the silent group does not desire. This understanding of silence as connected to a specific discourse that is being denied relates to Scott's idea of a hidden transcript, which is always parasitic upon the public transcript. In the same way, resistant silences do not have meaning apart from their denial of a specific form of discourse. By denying this dominant discourse, one practicing resistant silence works to unsettle language, opening up space for resistance even without the use of words. Such an act, however, must be sought and achieved, not forced upon an individual.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 158.

Silences of resistance reject discourses imposed by unjust power structures, but those in power may misinterpret such silences. Cordelia's silence rejects Lear's discourse, but he misinterprets her silence as expressing a lack of love rather than the love that she intends. Christ's dialogue with Pilate before his crucifixion is another example of a form of misinterpreted silence that rejects the terms of the dominant discourse. Mark recounts this episode in the following way:

They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.<sup>14</sup>

In Jesus's first response, he does not directly respond to Pilate's question, but rather replies in an ironic register that calls into question the form of kingship understood by Pilate. Although Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, he exercised his power in the form of dispossession, showing the contrast between divine and human power. After this first response, Jesus falls silent, boycotting the terms of discourse offered him by the chief priests. In this way, Jesus practices a resistant silence, but this silence ultimately condemns him to death. Instead of being interpreted as a rejection of the form of kingship known by the chief priests, Jesus's silence is understood as an affirmation of the charges against him. This misunderstanding of the meaning of a silence is a danger of silences of resistance, but such possible misunderstanding deepens an appeal to eschatology because God rightly hears what these silences express.

Although resistant silences can be misinterpreted, they are still capable of disrupting the dominant discourse. By rejecting the dominant discourse, resistant silences

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<sup>14</sup> Mark 15:1b-5

prevent these discourses from becoming self-perpetuating by calling into question the appropriate response to them. Although the silence may be interpreted in a way unintended by the practitioner of resistant silence, it still disrupts the dominant discourse insofar as silence is not the normal response to this discourse. Misinterpretation is a danger one must accept in order to practice silences of resistance. This problem could potentially be resolved through an appeal to God as the perfect listener, an idea that I will return to in the next chapter.

The above descriptions of resistant silence explain the way that one can utilize silence as a form of resistance. Yet, these descriptions do not explicate why silence can be a more effective form of resistance than speech. I contend that silence brings a unique contribution to the practice of resistance and is not a second-rate form of resistance, but rather one that ought be embraced. Through grounding the resistant silence in eschatological hope, one is able to understand the way in which silence can be an effective form of resistance through the power of vulnerability.

By grounding these silences in eschatological trust, silence, if practiced rightly, can be a form of communicative nonviolence in which Christians refuse to participate in the power structures that first contributed to silencing and oppression. Miroslav Volf sets forth this idea of eschatologically rooted nonviolence, though his work is primarily concerned with physical violence rather than communicative violence. Volf contends that both the oppressor and the oppressed stand in need of repentance from their respective violence and temptation to violence. He argues that “for a victim to repent means not to allow the oppressors to determine the terms under which social conflict is

carried out.”<sup>15</sup> This quote suggests that, although an oppressor clearly sins in their oppression of another individual, the oppressed can sin through a desire to retaliate against the oppressor in the same way in which they were oppressed. If his point is broadened to communication, it is essential that the silenced not become a silencer of others. Such a call to nonviolence is not one that Volf understands as an easy task. Instead, a naïve trust in the “infectious power of nonviolence” is a form of “suburban ideology” that would not be helpful to the oppressed.<sup>16</sup> Instead, he believes that a commitment to nonviolence depends upon trust in an eschatological future in which God will judge those perpetrators of injustice. For Volf, “the only way in which nonviolence and forgiveness will be possible in a world of violence is through displacement or transference of violence, not through its complete relinquishment.”<sup>17</sup> Only by trusting in a God who will finally judge those who refuse to accept God’s freely offered grace can the oppressed choose nonviolent resistance rather than violently harming the oppressor when given the opportunity. The oppressed transfer their claim of violence and retribution to God’s future judgment rather than seeking retribution themselves. In this way, eschatological hope makes possible the rejection of oppressive power through nonviolent resistance.

Rachel Muers explicitly connects eschatology and silence. She argues, in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “silence in the penultimate is here an expression of

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<sup>15</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 116.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

dependence on, and orientation toward, the free act of God understood as future.”<sup>18</sup> The Christian is able to remain silent because of his or her understanding of God as the one who in the future will act to bring justice and reconciliation to the cosmos. Silence can be understood as waiting for God’s action. This activity of patient waiting is a form of vulnerability in which the Christian relinquishes control over the outcome of his or her actions, trusting God’s future work. Such a form of dispossession through trust in God’s future redemption is commended in the scriptures. The author of Hebrews commends Abraham’s offering up of Isaac because Abraham “considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead.”<sup>19</sup> Through an individual’s vulnerable dispossession of the outcome of his or her actions, God works in the world, fulfilling God’s promises of eschatological reconciliation.

Muers argues that such an eschatological attitude affects one’s ethic of communication insofar as the Christian, living in the penultimate, waiting for God’s future action, resists oppression by “remaining silent in the face of unresolved conflict or inexplicable suffering, not trying to resolve it by speaking a decisive word.”<sup>20</sup> Eschatological hope frees Christians from needing the last word on matters. Instead, they become able to remain silent in the face of deep suffering or conflict to which they cannot foresee a positive solution. Such trust depends upon God’s action in the brokenness of the world, even to the extent of raising the dead. Instead of silencing others, Christians can remain silent trusting that God will one day bring justice to the world.

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<sup>18</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 91.

<sup>19</sup> Hebrews 11:19

<sup>20</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 91.

A potential critique of eschatological resistant silences is that they remove agency from the oppressed, encouraging passivity. This claim is particularly seen within feminist discussions, which critique the patriarchal imposition of attitudes of passivity and submission upon women, silencing them, preventing their full expression of personhood as active agents. If trust in the future eschatological redemption of God is oppressive by perpetuating these forms of submission, then it seems that the theological contribution to silences of resistance would be seriously flawed insofar as it perpetuates a cycle of oppression rather than providing a form of resistance to it.

Coakley responds to this critique of silence by arguing that modern feminist criticisms of vulnerability are misguided within Christian theology, grounding this response in her understanding of *kenosis*. She contends that, within Christian traditions of contemplation, a “rather special form of ‘vulnerability’ is not an invitation to be battered; nor is its silence a silencing.” Instead, she conceives of contemplation as making space for “the subtle but enabling presence of a God who neither shouts nor forces, let alone ‘obliterates.’”<sup>21</sup> One sees God as neither coercive nor silencing through understanding the *kenosis* of Jesus, by whom Coakley argues that “‘masculinist...’ forms of power are eschewed from the outset.”<sup>22</sup> In the incarnation, one sees that God does not exercise power in the same way that humans often do. Although many powerful human acts result in the silencing of others, Jesus’s incarnation shows that God’s power is most fully revealed in Jesus’s assumption of weak human flesh. Thus, the Christian must seek forms of power that stand at odds with worldly exercises of power, mirroring Paul’s statement

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<sup>21</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.



that “power is made perfect in weakness.”<sup>23</sup> This understanding of divine power as operating on a different plane than human power helps to explain the way in which keeping silence can be empowering and resistant rather than inherently silencing. The incarnation remodels the Christian’s conception of power, leading to rejection of forms of power that depend upon the subjugation of the other. Through practicing the vulnerability of silence, which entails waiting upon the action of God, Christians resist injustice in such a way that they attempt to prevent their complicity in further injustice. With respect to communication, the practice of keeping silence is one way to resist forms of power that depend upon the triumph of the strongest speech.

This response sees vulnerability as not an essentially negative trait, but rather an expression of power. The Christian keeping resistant silence mirrors God who exercises power in ways that are at odds with traditional understandings of power. Williams argues that “the silent/silenced God spoken of in connection with the image of crucified dispossession can come to be seen as actively self-revealing.”<sup>24</sup> In his overall argument that silence can have meaning, Williams locates a strong example of this meaning in the self-revelation of God in the act of being silenced by the cross. Although it seems counterintuitive to understand the cross as an exercise of power, it is through the cross that one understands divine power. This transformation of understanding is effected by understanding Christ as willingly offering himself to the silence of the cross. Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, suggests that this offering was in accord with the will of God.<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 181.

<sup>25</sup> Acts 2:23

Christian understands power differently from the coercive model. Instead, the cross reveals most deeply the way God works in the world.<sup>26</sup> Through the silencing of the proclamation of Jesus on the cross, God reveals that God can work through silence to bring redemption.

This form of self-revelation reveals the true nature of divine power. Coakley refers to this unique connection between dispossession and expression as the “paradox of power and vulnerability.”<sup>27</sup> Coakley connects these two concepts more intimately than is common in discourses on power. Such a connection helps to respond to the objection that grounding resistant silence in eschatology results in an imposed passivity upon the one who silently waits for God. Silence can be an example of the way in which vulnerability is closely connected with the exercise of power. By choosing not to actively speak, the one who remains silent is not powerless, but exercising a different sort of power that depends upon self-emptying and vulnerability, privileging the silent part of the communicative environment instead of the speaking one.

Another objection to using silence as a form of resistance is that silence, like any other exercise of power, can be used violently. For example, silence can be used to harm others because of the way in which, unmindfully practiced, it can support the status quo. I will further explore these violent forms of silence in Chapter Three, where I consider ways in which the church has failed in its silence.

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<sup>26</sup> For more on the way in which the cross transforms our perception of divine power, see Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*, 21-43.

<sup>27</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 34.

Because of this potential objection, it is important that resistant silences be nonviolent silences. In order for a silence to be nonviolent, it cannot be forced upon others. Rather, one must choose to undertake silence in response to a particular situation of injustice so that it calls attention to violence towards others. It is essential that nonviolent silences aim at change rather than complicity in a violent status quo. In this way, resistant silences must be built around care for the other rather than one's own gain because nonviolent resistant silences may result in harm to their practitioners. Resistant silences are particularly well suited to combat communicative violence built around the use of speech to harm and silence others. By remaining silent, one is able to reject the terms of violent speech-based discourses, moving the communicative environment towards a more flourishing state in which individuals are able to freely choose to speak and remain silent.

A third critique of resistant silence is that such silence produces inaction among those who practice it and is thereby not a form of resistance at all. This objection is connected with the feminist objection insofar as it is focused upon the supposed passivity of the one keeping silence. Both objections rely upon a conception of resistance built around the forms and patterns of power exercised by the oppressor. This objection conceives of resistant silence as a form of resistance that is complicit with the status quo because of its lack of verbal objection to oppressive forms of power. If this objection holds, then it would remove the possibility of silence as a form of resistance, instead moving the primary forms of resistance to speech-acts and actions.

However, my characterization of silence as a form of communicative nonviolence helps to address this objection. Martin Luther King Jr., in an address at Brandeis

University, argues for an “alternative to violence” in resistance. Instead, he calls the African American community to nonviolent forms of resistance against the power structures of the segregated South. King argues that the approach of nonviolence is “not a method of cowardice or stagnant passivity.” For King, “nonviolence does not mean non-activity,” but rather “is non-aggressive physically but dynamically aggressive spiritually.”<sup>28</sup> The form of nonviolence practiced by civil rights advocates was certainly not a silent one, but rather one that relied deeply upon words. However, I believe that King’s understanding of nonviolence can apply analogically to the practice of resistant silence. For this comparison to hold, the practice of keeping resistant silence must not be understood as a passive activity, but rather an active one that seeks transformation of unjust systems through the reconciliation of the oppressed and the oppressor. The one who keeps a resistant silence actively works to subvert dominant discourses. Silence requires intentional effort and action in order to set aside a place in which it can be kept. This practice is not necessarily an easy one, and in practice may result in negative consequences for the practitioner, in the same way that civil rights protestors bore violence against themselves without retaliation.

A final objection to the idea of resistant silences is that they reduce silence to merely another form of speech, not allowing it to exist on its own or provide a unique contribution to resistance. When instances of silence are discussed, they often appear reducible to forms of speech with particular arguments and messages. Given this characterization, silence appears to be only another form of speaking against injustice, but seems to bring no special contribution to the practice of resistance. If silence is to be a

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<sup>28</sup> King, “Justice Without Violence.”

form of resistance distinct from speech, then it is necessary to discuss silence's particular forms and contributions.

Williams's discussion of silence addresses this potential objection by arguing that silence exists at the limits of speech, working to unsettle speech. He argues that "silence 'loosens the texture' of this preceding activity."<sup>29</sup> Silence differs from speech because of its indeterminate character rather than the particular meaning expressed by speech. Silence exists at the edges of speech, gesturing towards an area of meaning beyond speech. Although silence and speech are mutually framing and deeply interconnected, they are not reducible to each other in the way this objection attempts to do. The unsettling character of silence disrupts the dominant discourses that result in oppression. Speech could not accomplish this unsettling because it operates on the same level as the oppressive discourse. Thus, silence offers a unique contribution to resistance by revealing the limitations of speech, that which speech cannot say. In this way, silence can be practiced alongside speech as a form of resistance in its own right, not one reducible to a particular kind of speech.

Finding power in silent dispossession may be counterintuitive to many individuals, but I argue that this power is the kind of power that Christians ought exercise. Such power calls into question the primacy of active speech in the democratic process, possibly providing a method for the reintegration of practices of vulnerability in political discourse. By recovering the possibility of forms of power that do not depend upon the oppression of others, Christian theology may offer a distinctive contribution to political communication. In contemporary political rhetoric, words seem to convey less

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<sup>29</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 159.

meaning, instead becoming utterances designed to produce positive emotive responses rather than communication. By considering the communicative function of silence, the Christian conceives of practices of indeterminate meaning that challenge discourses no longer communicating meaning.

Silence thereby is not essentially silencing, but rather can be a form of power when used as a means of resistance. Through investigating silence from a theological perspective, one is able to respond to several objections against the use of silence as a form of resistance. The greatest theological contribution to silences of resistance is that of eschatology, which enables a repressed group to use silence as a form of resistance while trusting that their cause will triumph because God stands on the side of the oppressed. Silence contains an important political dimension insofar as it both reveals oppressive forms of discourse and attempts to resist communicative violence. I now turn to another way in which silence can be a form of power, its connection to listening.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Silence of the Silencer: Listening as Theological Work

This chapter argues that not only can a repressed minority utilize silence in resistance as discussed in Chapter One, but also that the voluntary silence of the oppressor<sup>1</sup> is an essential way of sharing in the listening life of God and thereby a form of non-coercive power. Such voluntarily kept silence can result in listening on the part of the oppressor, providing space for the oppressed to speak. Such silence is grounded in the life of God, who hears rightly the silence and speech of the oppressed.

First, I will utilize some insights of feminist theologians to argue that silence is a necessary component of communication with and learning from the oppressed because of the connection between silence and listening. Then, I will show the way in which such voluntarily kept silence differs from silence imposed upon the oppressed. Next, I will ground this Christian ethical practice of listening in God, understood as the one who hears. Finally, I will conclude by showing the way in which some liberation theologians can be understood as examples of this action of silent listening.

Silence frames speech, creating the communicative field in which speech can occur. Max Picard argues that “silence is a basic phenomenon.”<sup>2</sup> By this phrase, Picard

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<sup>1</sup> By oppressor, I have in mind those who are privileged by the social, political and economic systems of the modern world. Although these individuals may not be actively involved in the oppression of others, the social structures and systems in which they find themselves make them at least tacitly involved in the silencing of minority voices.

<sup>2</sup> Picard, *The World of Silence*, 21.

means that silence is the ordinary state of existence, from which speech emerges. For Picard, it is impossible to conceive of an unframed speech, but he argues that one can encounter an unbounded silence. Picard gives ontological priority to silence, which he understands as the natural state of existence into which one imposes speech. This conception of silence stands in opposition to the one given by Rowan Williams, who argues, “We cannot imagine an ‘unframed’ or pure silence: we can only imagine silence in which we are not hearing anything.”<sup>3</sup> Williams, in this quotation, appears to privilege speech or noise as the fundamental state of existence, which frames all silences. However, one can synthesize the arguments of these two thinkers to argue that silence and speech are mutually framing, each an important part of the communicative environment.

The practice of communication presupposes both silence and speech. Communication is impossible in a cacophony of noise in which nothing can be properly heard. Thus, it is essential that at least some parties in the communicative space remain silent to hear the voices of speakers. Similarly, communication requires speech to frame silences, helping to give these silences more determinate meanings. Therefore, both silence and speech are important for the process of communication.

This framing nature of silence and speech has been utilized to establish a “philosophy of listening,” notably by Gemma Corradi Fiumara. She argues that most understandings of communication privilege speech at the expense of silence. Fiumara’s key insight is what she refers to as a “divided *logos*.”<sup>4</sup> By this concept, she means her

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 157.

<sup>4</sup> Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language*, 11.



argument that western society has divided the human activity of language so that it is focused primarily on speech at the expense of a robust understanding of listening. She argues that, within modern society, “the stress inevitably falls on the irreplaceable value of the expressive capacity rather than on the propensity to listen.”<sup>5</sup> Such an emphasis upon speech and expression results in philosophy being understood through the “metaphor of ‘battle’” rather than “those of gardening or choreography.”<sup>6</sup> Western philosophical discourse in general conceives of itself as engaged in a war of propositions against other propositions, a view that gained greater prominence after Hegel’s conception of history as a dialectical process in which a thesis and an antithesis conflict to form an ultimate synthesis. For Fiumara, this conception of philosophy as a battle between opposing propositions results in the loss of the ability to fully engage in the philosophical task, resulting in a communicative field fraught with conflict rather than cooperation.

Instead, Fiumara attempts to establish a philosophy of communication built around cooperation. In addition to the metaphors of gardening and choreography, she conceives of the philosophical process as “midwifery,” a process by which a listening person assists another person in birthing an idea that they previously may have been unable to express, thereby allowing philosophical work to continue.<sup>7</sup> This understanding of communication depends upon the cooperation of two individuals in order to arrive at meaning. Neither gardening nor choreography is a completely solitary endeavor. Instead,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 143.

they require that an individual entrust their creative work to another. In choreography, the choreographer must give his or her work to a dancer in order for expression to occur. In gardening, the gardener must release his or her own control over the plants, trusting in their ability to grow. In much the same way, Fiumara argues that philosophy must be based upon entrusting one's speech to the listening other. Someone must fall silent in order to listen and receive the speech of another, working together in the process of philosophical discourse, cooperatively arriving at understanding.

This understanding of the importance of listening helps to illustrate the fundamental nature of silence as a necessary component to being an attentive listener. Listening, though a complex task, involves silence in order to hear the voice of the other, taking time to pause in the advancement of one's own expressive propositions to listen. Fiumara particularly relates this open space to her understanding of silence, whose "highest function... is revealed in the creation of a coexistential space which permits dialogue to come along."<sup>8</sup> The existence of silence between individuals allows for conversational space, from which philosophical thought and advancement can begin. Silence's framing character makes possible the opening of this space into which speech can come. In this way, silence becomes an essential and powerful part of the work of communication.

Rachel Muers expands Fiumara's insight into the warlike nature of a culture defined mostly by speech to apply to Christian doctrine. Muers argues that "an understanding of communication that attributes all activity to speakers... leaves the silenced one with no choice but to enter a battle of competing voices and to become

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 99.

complicit in the silencing of others.”<sup>9</sup> The communicative space, if understood as a space in which only the advancement of propositions matters, becomes a space in which the loudest voices triumph, but are not necessarily heard. The voices of the marginalized and silenced, a group of people whom Christians have regarded as important to a full understanding of Christ, are unable to rise above the competing voices in such a battlefield of ideas.<sup>10</sup> Muers argues that Christian theology has been implicit in this sort of silencing because of its “emphasis on speech” that could be “interpreted as an attempt to seize and maintain control, not only over the expression and conceptualization of divinity, but thereby over the capacity to shape social structures and values.”<sup>11</sup> Muers argues that the possible solution of these marginalized voices entering into the speech-based warfare does not solve the problem of silencing, but only contributes to the overwhelming noise of the communicative space in which ideas succeed only by defeating others.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Muers argues that theological communication must be reimagined in such a way as not to privilege speech at the expense of listening.

One proposed solution to this problem of speech-based theological discourse is to recover the importance of listening silence, a concept advocated by Nelle Morton. Morton argues for a practice within Christian theology of “hearing to speech rather than

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<sup>9</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> This understanding of Christ’s particular identification with the poor and marginalized can be based upon the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 where both blessings and curses are distributed to God’s people based upon the activities which were undertaken for “one of the least of these,” which ultimately were done for Christ (25:40). This passage seems to suggest one way in which Jesus is particularly identified with the marginalized and poor.

<sup>11</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

speaking to hearing.”<sup>13</sup> By this phrase, Morton advocates a way of doing theology in which people, in her case women, can encourage those with whom they dialogue to tell their own stories rather than remaining trapped by larger narratives set forth by those in power. The process of “hearing to speech” entails the creation of a communicative space through the practice of hearing. The presence of a sympathetic listener enables the other to speak. In this way, the practice of hearing becomes a powerful way to envoice those previously unable to speak.

She argues that “hearing to speech is political” because such hearing results in a challenge to the dominant narratives implemented by those in power.<sup>14</sup> In this conception of theology, hearing and listening is recovered as an important category by which the marginalized and oppressed are able to speak for themselves. Morton thinks that by engaging in such a practice, women can work to challenge the patriarchal structures and images that work against the voices of women being heard. She broadens the space of hearing, contending that this “hearing is far more than acute listening. [It is] a hearing engaged in by the whole body that evokes speech—a new speech—a new creation.”<sup>15</sup> Listening is not only a passive task, but a creative one that results in new speech from individuals who were previously unable to speak for themselves. Such hearing can allow individuals to enter the conversational space without engaging in the war of competing positions. Instead, such hearing creates space for these statements to emerge on their own in a creative way.

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<sup>13</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 54–55.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 127–128.

Morton believes that such hearing does not stop with the individual because “once a person is heard to speech, she becomes a hearing person.”<sup>16</sup> Morton argues that, through “hearing to speech,” an individual begins to hear the speech of others, creating more cooperative communicative spaces. Thus, the growth of communities of individuals hearing each other to speech overcomes the problems of communication detailed by Muers in which individuals are forced to enter a warlike space. Instead, the practice of hearing results in the creation of a new conversational space in which individuals are able to contribute without thereby silencing others.

Morton’s model of “hearing to speech” is one that privileges speech rather than silence, but I argue that truly hearing to speech concerns communication rather than only speech. Silence is a part of the communicative environment that has been neglected, but it can be an expressive counterpart to speech, creating true communication. Both elements of communication, speech and silence, form important parts of the communicative environment and it is important to not privilege either one to the detriment of the other.

This type of silence in order to hear others differs from silences of oppression that oppressors force onto the oppressed. Langdon Gilkey describes what he calls the “political” mode of silence, in which “silence is *passively* encountered as forced upon one.”<sup>17</sup> He builds this description of silence from his own experience in a Chinese internment camp, where he encountered silence as “a vehicle of non-being, of the Void, of ultimate threat.”<sup>18</sup> This form of silence is used to oppress others, coercively preventing

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>17</sup> Gilkey, “The Political Meaning of Silence,” 22.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 31.

them from speaking. Such silence stands in stark contrast to Morton's concept of the silence of the hearing other. Biblical texts also exhibit this oppressive form of silence. Caroline Blyth argues that Dinah's silence in Genesis is "nothing less than a form of oppression, the mark of her exclusion from honest representation within the text."<sup>19</sup> Blyth contends that the patriarchal context in which the text was composed resulted in an eternal voicelessness for Dinah, a form of deep oppression in which she serves primarily as a prop in a story dominated by males. The silence imposed upon these characters is the opposite of the silence advocated by Morton. Silence can be an empowering experience if taken on by an individual in order to listen to the speech of another. Silence that is imposed upon others, silencing, often has the opposite effect. The voicelessness of Dinah is one that is difficult to overcome in a world where others will not stop talking in order to give her a voice. However, the work of listening remains an essential theological task that seeks to create flourishing communicative spaces constituted both by the speech of the marginalized and the silent listening of the privileged. Although it may be difficult to create such listening spaces, it is an important task of the church to work to create such spaces.

I will now argue that one ought ground the importance of a posture of silent listening upon a theological foundation that conceives of God as the ultimate hearer, an activity in which humans are able to share, enduing theological reflection with the important task of listening to the other. If one conceives of God as the one who ultimately listens, a framework can be laid for the Christian's emulation of such behavior. Such an understanding of God stands in contrast to one dominant view, that of God as the speaker

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<sup>19</sup> Blyth, "Terrible Silence, Eternal Silence," 486.

*par excellence*, towards which all listening activity ought be directed. Describing God as a hearer and not only a constant speaker opens up new space for Christians to listen to others and provides a way for the oppressed and marginalized to voice their concerns.

This view of God as the one who listens stands in opposition to an understanding of God as the voice that overwhelms others, the voice before which humans must always fall silent. Such a conception of God mirrors the conception of speech that Fiumara referred to as the “divided *Logos*.”<sup>20</sup> Just as western philosophy has tended toward the emphasis of the expressive word over the activity of listening, much of Christian theology has focused upon God’s activity as speaker to the neglect of God’s practice of listening. Much literature on silence in Christian theology focuses upon the duty of an individual to remain silent before God, waiting for God’s voice to instruct. Although such listening to God is an important part of the Christian life, such an injunction to listen can be used to silence others, particularly those voices that are deemed less worthy to be heard. Morton argues that the “*Logos* deified reduces communication to a one-way relationship—that of speak-ing.”<sup>21</sup> A conception of God as only speaker tends to discount the various voices of humans giving expression to their own experiences.

Through attempting to recover a description of God as a hearing God, I do not propose to redefine God as one who is engaged in the mute silence of the one who does not hear. A conception of God who is silent, but does not hear may be represented in the description of God as *Deus Absconditus*, the God who is hidden. Morton critiques this metaphor because of the way in which it discounts the experience of those who are

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<sup>20</sup> Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 54.

suffering. She believes that such a conception of God tells individuals to “wait patiently until ‘He’ deigns to speak again.”<sup>22</sup> Describing humans’ duty as fully contained in waiting for the speech of God causes the speech of individuals to lose meaning because of its unimportance compared to God’s speech. However, a robust understanding of God as one who listens allows such human speech to retain value because God hears it even if it falls unheard upon other human ears.

One way of illustrating the hearing nature of God is Muers’s understanding of Christology. She argues that “the silence of the Cross is the silence of God in which both our failed words and our wrongly kept silences are heard for what they are.”<sup>23</sup> In the crucifixion, Jesus experienced silencing, but even this silence was heard by God the Father. God in this conception is not the one who speaks, but the one who is silenced and the one who hears. Muers believes that such a conception overcomes “preoccupation with God’s speech,” and thereby allows space for others to be heard, valuing human speech in addition to the speech of God.<sup>24</sup> In the cross, God the Father hears the presence expressed in silence, even though this silence’s meaning is unheard by a human hearer. In this way, even the voiceless Jesus upon the cross is rightly heard by God the Father. The silence of the cross becomes communicative because it is heard by God the Father, allowing silence to in this case have presence rather than only absence. In this way, silence is able to form part of the communicative environment beyond the contributions to speech, becoming not only the way of hearing others to speech but expressive in itself. Such listening activity

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>23</sup> Muers, “Silence and the Patience of God,” 93.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



gives hope to silenced individuals who are unable to be heard by human listeners. Muers asks what “if silence were part of the way God relates most closely to the world—so that silence is not only ‘withdrawal,’ but integral to God’s action?”<sup>25</sup> If silence is “integral to God’s action,” then it seems to be possible to establish a space within which human silence and listening can occur.

This silence of God allows for the “hearing to speech” of humans as well as undergirds humans’ “hearing to speech” of each other. Morton argues that a robust understanding of God as the hearing one supports this position. God listens, “hearing us to our own responsible word. That kind of hearing would be prior to the theologians’ own words.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, because God is one who hears, God is able to encourage individuals to share their own words. God, because of God’s hearing nature, acts to overcome the silencing of those who are silenced thereby respecting the unique contribution of creatures. As the one who was silenced in the crucifixion, God works to overcome the silencing of others. The silent other, who is unable to speak, is properly heard by God. In this way, even wrongfully imposed silences can become a mode of expression that is properly heard by God. In this way, the listening of God grounds both speaking and keeping silent, allowing for both parts of communication to work together to encourage the engagement between people that communication is designed to produce.

God’s hearing is prior to human speech, making space for such speech to occur. Muers argues, “Decisions are made, words are uttered, and the future is awaited and

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<sup>25</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, 129.

shaped in the presence of the silent God.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, all utterances and actions undertaken by creatures occur within the presence of God, who in a listening silence allows creation to bring forth speech. God “hears to speech” each member of creation as they work out their individual lives. Such primordial listening also allows humans to hear each other to speech. Muers states that “to keep silence together is not merely for each to keep her own silence; it is to keep one another’s silence, which in turn only makes sense if it is also a keeping of God’s silence.”<sup>28</sup> Christians, as they fall silent before the other, participate in God’s hearing silence at the crucifixion. This participation allows for the creation of communities of responsible silent listening before others. In order to overcome the dividing of the *Logos*, to recover listening, it is essential to recover the idea of a God who listens.

In a work entitled *Theosony: Towards a Theology of Listening*, Nóirín Ní Riain attempts to establish a form of Christian practice focused upon the aural sense rather than the visual and oral senses. Ní Riain argues that Christianity has neglected the aural sense, which she argues is key to Christianity from its Jewish roots with the *Shema*’s injunction to Israel to “hear” God.<sup>29</sup> Although Ní Riain focuses much of her work upon the mandate of humans to hear God, she also discusses the way in which Christians are called to hear one another and the way in which God hears creation. Similarly to Picard above, Ní Riain argues that silence is the framing space of speech and that silence is necessary for

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<sup>27</sup> Muers, “Silence and the Patience of God,” 91.

<sup>28</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 153.

<sup>29</sup> Ní Riain, *Theosony*, 38.

listening.<sup>30</sup> A fundamental part of Ní Riain's argument is her idea that "the aural proceeds the oral."<sup>31</sup> Because an individual both hears other voices and hears their own voice prior to speaking, one's ability to hear is an essential part of the human experience. However, the idea of theosony, a theology of listening, does not depend entirely upon the listening of human subjects, but also the listening of God, grounded in God's silence. Ní Riain describes God as the "pinnacle of silence," a description that she holds in tension with the breaking of this silence by Jesus.<sup>32</sup> She attempts to "conjoin the aural and the silent in God's self-disclosure."<sup>33</sup> Although God does reveal Godself through speech, silence is a complementary part of God's character. This silence of God is important because it allows for humans to speak. It is important that this silence is an essential part of God's character because silent listening is not thereby something alien to humans, but is one way in which humans can witness to being made in the image of God. Silence, for Ní Riain, is not a secondary aspect of God's character, but rather is essential to God's being.

This silence of God allows space for humans to speak, furthering Ní Riain's theology of listening to include God's own listening and not only the listening of humans to the voice of God. It is important that God is a listening God because God is thereby able to hear the "actual timbre of every human voice."<sup>34</sup> The idea of each voice having a unique sound is an important one to Ní Riain because it allows each individual person to

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 174.

be unique. However, the paradox of this unique timbre is that every person hears their own voice in a particular way that is accessible only to them and to God. God is the only hearer that is privileged to access this hidden inner voice. In this deep area of listening, God is most fully to, as Morton puts it, “hear to speech” humans because God hears them more fully and more intimately than any created being. As God silently listens, humans are able to pray, to speak to the one that always listens.

An important piece to overcoming the silencing of others is for the privileged to stand silent so that the oppressed may speak in their own voices. A helpful grounding for this task is that of the doctrine of God when God is conceived of as the one who hears. I now turn to one movement that concerns itself with listening to the voices of the oppressed, “hearing to speech” these voices—liberation theology. Although liberation theology encompasses a broad variety of movements, I will here be concerned primarily with two authors, Gustavo Gutiérrez, writing from a Peruvian context, and Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian attempting to create a “liberation theology for the first world.”<sup>35</sup>

Gutiérrez’s theology is inseparable from his Peruvian context in which he encountered the voices of the poor and marginalized in daily life. In his commentary, *On Job*, Gutiérrez establishes the theme of the book as “how to speak of God in the midst of suffering,” not the experience of suffering itself.<sup>36</sup> He believes that those who are suffering, particularly the poor, face “the onslaught of ideologized ways of talking about God,” which attempt to make the poor accept “interpretations alien to their religious

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<sup>35</sup> Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 217.

<sup>36</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 13.

experience.”<sup>37</sup> This imposition of religious values upon the suffering of others is a form of silencing because it does not allow for the other to speak of their experience in an unmediated way, but rather attempts to fit the experience of others into predetermined categories. It is also a failure to listen to the speech of the poor, whose simple religious faith Gutiérrez believes is often closer to the truth because of their intimate relationship with God in which they speak to God rather than only speaking about God as many theologians do. Gutiérrez believes that the cry of the suffering “cannot be muted,” but that “those who suffer unjustly have a right to complain and protest.”<sup>38</sup> By refusing to listen to the cries of the suffering, Western theology operates in an impoverished way, attempting to force human experiences into religious categories in the same way that Job’s friends attempt to place Job’s suffering in the category of the “doctrine of retribution.”<sup>39</sup> Such work silences the marginalized, furthering the “divided *Logos*” focused primarily upon speech and advancement of positions about God rather than listening to God and to the cries of the poor.

Gutiérrez’s work as a liberation theologian is an attempt to overcome this failure to listen by first listening to the poor, then providing a voice for their cry so that others may hear. Gutiérrez notes that “the poor and the marginalized have a deep-rooted conviction that no one is interested in their lives and misfortunes” because people do not frequently listen to these marginalized groups.<sup>40</sup> Just as Job’s friends prioritized speaking

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 24.

their own theological systems over listening to the complaint of Job, Gutiérrez argues that the privileged do not frequently listen to the poor. If true listening were to occur, these individuals could begin to understand that their unique stories possess meaning and value. Gutiérrez thinks that “expressing our inner world will lead us to gain new and fruitful areas of personal silence and encounter.”<sup>41</sup> This “hearing to speech” by others allows those who are in poverty to enter more fully the human experience of encounter with others.

Such an activity can be engaged in by the privileged of the world, but it requires that these individuals refrain from imposing theological categories upon the speech of the poor, instead appropriately listening. Gutiérrez does so by consciously situating his theological reflection within his Latin American context, letting the voices of the poor inform his theology. He cautions theologians to not practice “a way of talking that does not first hear and share [the poor’s] suffering.”<sup>42</sup> The first act of empowering the marginalized to speak is always listening. Although the privileged may feel the need to work quickly to raise the voices of the poor, doing so without first fully listening runs the danger of these privileged people imposing their own theological thoughts and categories onto the experiences of the poor. By waiting to listen before speaking on behalf of the other, the privileged person hears what was previously expressed only in the silence of the other.

Jürgen Moltmann engages in a similar task of working with the voices of the marginalized to inform his theological reflection, but attempts to do so from the position

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<sup>41</sup> Gutiérrez, “Theological Language,” 187.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 207.

of a white European male. Moltmann thinks that “the liberation of the oppressed from their suffering must lead to the liberation of the oppressors from the evil they commit.”<sup>43</sup> Working from the side of the oppressor, he argues that liberation theology cannot concern itself only with the oppressed, but this theology must in some sense impact all of humanity including the oppressor, who is often unknowingly complicit in the oppression of others. These oppressors must “withdraw their violence and their structures of violence if they want to turn back again to the community of human beings.”<sup>44</sup> In order to overcome isolating tendencies within the community of the oppressors, the oppressor must turn and listen to the oppressed, seeing the human experience from another perspective. In a caution against privileged people’s tendencies to see the poor as objects rather than people, Moltmann argues that the marginalized need “brothers and sisters who live with them and listen to them before they talk to them.”<sup>45</sup> In this statement, Moltmann intimately connects the idea of liberation with the ability of the oppressor to listen. Through this listening, the privileged can come to experience “the presence of Christ among [the poor] and the kingdom of God which begins in their midst.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, listening to the poor is not only beneficial because of the empowerment that it gives to the poor, but also its ability to transform the oppressor more into the image of the listening God. Because Jesus is identified intimately with the poor, the oppressor can encounter Jesus in

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<sup>43</sup> Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 186.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 235.

the face of the poor if he or she will stop to listen rather than merely imposing meaning upon their experiences.

Therefore, an essential piece of overcoming silencing in Christian theology is for the oppressed to fall silent in order that the oppressed person may speak and be heard. Because God is a God who listens, this work of listening has the holy purpose of the emulation of God. The space created for speech by silence is an important function of silence within Christian theology, and one that has been neglected in much of the Christian tradition. This neglect proceeds in part from a conception of silence as an essentially passive act. This chapter has aimed to show that silence as a necessary component of listening can be a form of participation in the life of God. Silence can be a powerful force in which one shares in God's non-coercive power of hearing others in their speech and silence. Because silence is a necessary part of listening, silence becomes a form of power, albeit power exercised in a different sense than traditional conceptions of power. In the next chapter, I turn to consider ways in which the church has improperly used the power of silence, becoming complicit in the silencing of others and practicing a form of silence that does not entail listening to the other.



## CHAPTER THREE

### The Silent and Silencing Church: The Need for Repentance

Although the preceding two chapters suggested that silence can be a form of power for Christians, the church has often misused this power, failing to listen to others, not making space for “hearing to speech.” This chapter explores the church’s complicity in the unjust silencing of others. Also, this chapter details times in which the church practiced silence poorly, remaining silent too long in the face of injustice. By church, I mean the invisible church constituted by all Christians, which finds expression in particular institutional ecclesial structures that may silence others. I argue that the church must accept these failures of silence and repent of its role in them before moving to a more constructive ethic of communication.

First, I show two ways in which the church has silenced the speech of others, through oppression and through overwhelming. I consider the objection that some forms of censorship may be justified in the removal of someone’s ability to speak in order to explain the particular form of negative silencing of which the church is guilty. I then turn to explore times when the church wrongly kept silent in the face of injustice. Finally, I conclude by arguing that the church must repent of these sins in order to be the sort of community it is called to be.

The first way in which the church has silenced others is through the oppressive robbing of a voice. One of the most visible forms of this kind of silencing is the deprivation of the voice of women within the life and history of the church. This

exclusion of women proceeds from Paul's enigmatic aside in 1 Corinthians that "women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."<sup>1</sup> These verses, when taken at face value, provided justification for the systematic silencing of women, resulting in the absence of much theological reflection by women. These verses may provide credence to feminist criticisms of silence as necessarily entailing silencing, but the patriarchal interpretation of these verses is not the only possible one, though it has been dominant throughout much of church history. Moltmann argues that one should take into account that "the Bible developed in a patriarchal world" when interpreting passages such as this one.<sup>2</sup> When interpreting Paul's letters, one must consider the historical context of their composition, as well as the problem introduced by having access to only one side of the conversation of which the letter was part. Interpretations of this passage that prevent the voice of women from informing the life of the church must consider other statements by Paul such as Galatians 3:28, where he argues that "in Christ" there is "no longer male or female."<sup>3</sup> However, although some early Christians fully included women in the life of the church, these liberating interpretations of Paul were in the minority during much of the church history, resulting in the silencing of many women. Thus, women were underrepresented in much theological debate of the church in the same way they were excluded from much of ordinary social life.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 14:34-35, NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 278.

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3:28 NRSV

The voices of the women that were heard in church history are the exceptions that prove the rule of their exclusion. During the late patristic and medieval period, the primary theological voices were male, and women that obtained a voice often did not do so on their own merits. An interesting case of a medieval woman who was able to speak on theological matters is Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard entered the public sphere of theology, not because of her status as the abbess of a prominent monastery, but rather because her primary mode of theological work was the mystical vision. Sabina Flanagan argues that Hildegard engaged in theological writing only “by disclaiming any intention of operating on the same terms as those (men) who had appropriated it.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, she “tended to emphasize the part played by divine inspiration in her understanding.”<sup>5</sup> During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, theology was a nearly exclusively male field, which denied most women the opportunity to engage in education. Interestingly, Hildegard entered the field of theology through claiming to be merely a divine mouthpiece. The manner in which Hildegard practiced theological discourse was through transcending her woman-ness to become the voice of the genderless God. Hildegard’s messages were not theologically problematic for men in her time period because they were seen as coming from God rather than a woman. Yet, through this divine inspiration, Hildegard was enabled to exercise a wide range of activities traditionally forbidden to women such as moving her convent and writing letters of advice to men. Her ability to write theology only through divine inspiration illustrates the silencing of other women of the period, whose works were not preserved for posterity.

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<sup>4</sup> Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

Another interesting woman who assumed the traditional speaking role in the life of the church, though in a nonorthodox way, was Jemima Wilkinson, an 18<sup>th</sup> century traveling preacher. Wilkinson was raised a Quaker, a group that allowed women to speak in their meetings, but she gained a wider following among both men and women, preaching in the open air to large crowds. Her authority as a preacher proceeded from a mystical experience in which she claimed to have died and had her body animated by a messenger called the “Universal Friend.”<sup>6</sup> In her role as the Universal Friend, Wilkinson transcended the limitations of her gender, enabling her to preach to all people by becoming a somewhat androgynous being. Although retaining her womanly features, “the masculine impression encouraged by her dress was strengthened by the fact that her associates never referred to her in the third person but always as the Friend.”<sup>7</sup> Preaching nearly 700 years after Hildegard’s writing, Wilkinson also was required to transcend the limits of her gender in order to enter the religious public sphere. To be accepted as a preacher, Wilkinson abandoned her gender, instead becoming a messenger from God. These two examples show the way in which women were silenced with respect to theological work for much of the history of the church. In order for these women to enter the public sphere, they had to claim an authority beyond their own intellectual powers, showing that their contribution to theology as women was not respected.

In this way, the contributions of Wilkinson and Hildegard are an example of Scott’s hidden transcript discussed in Chapter One. Because of the lack of attention paid to female theologians in their respective time periods, each woman instead inserted their

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<sup>6</sup> Wisbey, *Pioneer Prophetess*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

theological commentary into the dominant transcript through subversive means. Through attending to this hidden transcript, one can understand the way in which women were silenced during these particular periods in church history because the only available entry into the public transcript was through a repudiation of their gender.

The case of the silencing of women through oppression is unique because the church not only participated in, but also caused this sort of silencing. Muers notes the way in which “at all levels of theological discourse and ecclesial practice, hearers have been gendered as feminine, and the task of representing the obedient hearer of the word assigned to women.”<sup>8</sup> Such a critique does not undermine my earlier arguments about the importance of hearing to communication because the hearing imposed upon many women as a result of texts such as 1 Corinthians 13 is not freely chosen. Rather, the role of hearer is assigned from without, thereby reinforcing power relations in which the speaking male is perceived as having a greater importance and authority than the hearing female. In this way, the church has contributed to the silencing of women not only as a result of refusing to hear the way in which they have contributed to the history of the church, but also through depriving women of the role of speaker, ensuring their inability to enter theological discourse. The few women who transcended their role of hearer did so by not speaking as a woman. Yet, most women remained silenced without the possibility of a future voice.

The issue of the church’s silencing of others relates closely to censorship and whether an imposed silence is necessarily evil. Although modern western liberal sensibilities stand against censorship as a deprivation of speech, it seems at least possible

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<sup>8</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 112.

that censorship can be used for a good purpose. There may be some times in which the church is justified in censoring the speech of an individual out of concern for others.

An interesting case of censorship as it relates to Christian theology is that of Leonardo Boff, who was silenced by the Roman Catholic Church for ten months in 1985. Although many people reacted in a strongly negative way to Boff's silencing, he stated in an interview that he "received the 'obliging silence' as any Christian linked to the Church would: I accepted it with calm" because "it is better to walk with the Church than alone with my theology."<sup>9</sup> This view of the silencing of the church shows the ambiguous way in which silencing as a form of censorship can be received by the Christian faithful as something which one ought accept graciously. In addition to merely accepting the silencing of the church as an obedient member, Boff grew as a theologian during his period of silence, albeit not necessarily in the way the Roman curia expected. He says of his silencing, "I took it in a spirit of communion with the many thousands of persons silenced on this continent."<sup>10</sup> Through experiencing censorship, Boff came to understand one of the positive aspects of a privileged person falling silent, learning to listen more deeply to those who have historically been robbed of a voice. In this way, Boff's silence worked to confirm his own theological reflection Boff accepted the silence imposed upon him as an opportunity to engage in further theological reflection and discussion, albeit not in the public sphere. In this way, silencing is not necessarily evil if ultimately ordered towards communication. If a period of censorship is not final, then it is possible for one to hope that future dialogue and discussion will produce a consensus. Thus, the failure of

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<sup>9</sup> Boff, "A Brazilian Theologian Once Silenced by Cardinal Ratzinger Talks About the Old and the New Pope."

<sup>10</sup> Boff, *The Path to Hope*, 9.

the church in silencing others comes about through silences that aim to close discussion, depriving those with unpopular opinions of a forum to voice their concerns.

It thereby seems that occasions of censorship and the silencing that they entail can be justified by the church, though such silencing must be understood in light of the church's wrongful silencing of many groups throughout time. Such failures may give reason for the church to evaluate the way in which it prevents the speech of others, considering with humility that it may be wrong with respect to a certain issue. Through his silencing, Boff "realized that the issues confronting liberation theologians are relevant not only to our Latin American church but also to the fate of the universal church."<sup>11</sup> The time of silence allowed Boff time to expand his theology to affect the church as a whole. In this way, the censored silence of the church allowed for further theological reflection, opening up the possibility of theological growth. Such silences, if pursued properly, allow for further discussion and theological development, as can be seen in the later release of a more positive directive on liberation theology from the Vatican. In this directive, the Vatican spoke approvingly of Boff's work, calling the base community movement "a source of great hope for the church."<sup>12</sup> Though the silencing of Boff was not without flaw, this silence allowed further time for discussion of theological issues, ultimately slightly changing the orientation of the Vatican with respect to liberation theology. In this way, censorship can provide an opening into further speech if undertaken rightly with the intention of promoting further dialogue. Although Boff's

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>12</sup> Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff*, 115.

ensorship may not have been a perfect one, it opens up the possibility that silencing is not necessarily evil.

However, if censorship results in what Muers calls a “terminal silence” that “declares in a particular situation that no further act of mediation is possible,” then such forms of censorship and silencing would be unable to produce further dialogue and speech.<sup>13</sup> Although the church may be unable to fully silence the discussion of theological ideas in the public sphere, it is possible for it to mandate that such discussion occur outside of the church’s official structures. Such an imposition of censorship terminally silences an idea within the context of the church, forcing the theologian to choose between his or her theological community and the freedom to discuss ideas. Such terminal silences would mandate that these ideas never be discussed, shutting off potential dialogue and change. It is thus important to consider whether particular forms of censorship and silencing aim to curtail future discussion or to make space for discussion to occur. The church is charged with reconciliation of erring members, and reconciliation often comes about as a result of dialogue between the opposing parties. Yet, if the church denies all potential for such dialogue through declaring theological ideas off limits to discussion, then it cannot work to bring proponents of these ideas to reconciliation. Terminally silencing an individual seems to prevent the possibility of that individual’s persuasion to a place of repentance.

Thus, it seems that silencing through the practice of censorship has an ambivalent place in the history of the church. Although the church has silenced individuals whose voice it ought to have listened to, silences sometimes resulted in theological progress for

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<sup>13</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 6.



the church. The church must use its power of silence in a thoughtful way, considering how to embrace the variety of voices within it, though such a position may require the silencing of privileged individuals in order to hear the voices of the marginalized. The church must consider the voices to which it most often listens, ensuring that the most powerful voices are not the only ones that are heard.

Silencing through an oppressive deprivation of voice is not the only way in which the church has contributed to the silencing of others. If the silencing discussed thus far can be understood as a case of not enough words being spoken, the second form of silencing I consider is a case of too many words being spoken. The silencing of others can be achieved by overwhelming their speech through other speech, both through speaking on their behalf and through the creation of a cacophony such that the oppressed are unable to enter the discourse.

One way the church has silenced others is through speaking on their behalf rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Muers refers to this form of silencing as “garrulous silencing,” which she argues occurs with respect to women when they are “simply being talked about.”<sup>14</sup> This speaking on behalf of the other silences the oppressed individual by depriving them of their unique individual voice, imposing an interpretation of their experiences upon them that the oppressed individual may not accept. Gutiérrez cautions liberation theologians against a “way of talking that does not first hear and share [the poor’s] suffering, that does not feel the suffering of others.”<sup>15</sup> Through speaking on behalf of another, an individual who means to help an oppressed individual may

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>15</sup> Gutiérrez, “Theological Language,” 207.

misrepresent them, depriving them further of their own voice. In this way, discourse about oppressed individuals can occur divorced from the individuals themselves. Such practice amounts to a form of silencing through deprivation of agency.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the silencing of others through speaking on their behalf, the church has overwhelmed the speech of others through its own speech into which the oppressed were unable to enter. Through a large volume of words, the church has sometimes denied hearing to the quiet voices of the oppressed. Gutierrez argues that Job's "language shares the limitations of the faith of the poor," that it "cannot withstand the onslaught of ideologized ways of talking about God."<sup>17</sup> The characterization of the speech of the powerful as an "onslaught" is important for understanding the way that the cacophony of speech produced by the powerful results in silencing. Speaking without leaving space for others to respond silences others to the same extent as the deprivation of a voice. The marginalized often cannot enter the dominant discourse because the attack of voices from the dominant discourse silences them. Although I suggested above that the oppressed may not want to enter into the dominant discourse because doing so results in the silencing of others, it remains true that an overwhelming discourse effectively terminally silences those who are unable to engage in the terms provided by the dominant discourse.

Although it is possible for the church to speak too many words resulting in the silencing of others, the church can equally fail to appropriately use silence in remaining

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<sup>16</sup> This critique may shed some doubt upon my earlier description of the church's silencing of women, but I have attempted as far as possible to prevent an unfair speaking on behalf of the other through a consultation of female authors, building my characterization of this silencing upon their arguments.

<sup>17</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 54.

silent when it ought to speak. The church must not therefore always be the silent one, but rather sometimes is called to refrain from being silent in the face of injustice. The tension between the competing demands of remaining silent to create space for others to speak and speaking up against situations of injustice require the formulation of an ethic of communication that takes seriously the importance of both silence and speech in the life of the church.

The church's relationship with silence is complicated by the way the church itself has wrongly kept silent in the face of injustice. One entry into the church's wrongfully kept silence is through Martin Luther King Jr.'s condemnation of the "white moderate," who King condemned because "the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are."<sup>18</sup> Although King in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" notes several notable exceptions to the white church's silence in the civil rights movement, he interprets the silence of the majority of white churches as an endorsement of the status quo because of these churches' refusal to publically condemn the horrors of racism and segregation. This judgment reveals one danger of practicing silence—that such silence may tacitly endorse an unjust system. The moderate white church's silence in the face of segregation and the civil rights movement appears to be a moral flaw, one for which King believed that "the judgment of God is on the church as never before."<sup>19</sup> Thus, King believes the church in his time practiced silence wrongly through its refusal to speak up in support of the protestors, resulting in divine condemnation. In addition to this moral condemnation,

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<sup>18</sup> King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 848.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

King believed that the church's failure of speech would result in it being "dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century."<sup>20</sup> This prophecy appears to be one that has been fulfilled in many ways in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the church exercises less of a moral voice in political affairs, continuing to remain silent and even actively denying moral atrocities within its ranks such as the clergy sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church.

There is difficulty in interpreting the church's silence in the civil rights movement because such silence was not a universal one, but primarily one amongst Southern white churches. I now turn to discuss a case in which the churches of a much wider swath of society remained silent in the face of grave evil—that of the Holocaust. I will consider this silence from the perspective of the Vatican's silence in official condemnations of the tragedy, although this silence was only one example of Christian silence about the tragedy. I will compare this silence with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who provides an example of one way in which German Christians did break their silence about the Holocaust. A more thorough investigation into Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology explains why confession of the guilt of wrongly kept silences is key to the life of the church, necessary before the church can engage properly in ethical communication.

During World War II, the Vatican officially kept silent in the face of the tragedy of the Holocaust, choosing not to condemn the tragedy. MacCulloch notes that Pius XII "remained silent in public about the Jews," and after the war issued statements on the plight of the Jews that MacCulloch says "included some deliberate if understandable

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

obfuscation.”<sup>21</sup> A 1998 Vatican document entitled “We Remember: Reflections on the Shoah” notes that many Christians “were not strong enough to raise their voice in protest.”<sup>22</sup> Such a silence, the document argues “must be a call to penitence.”<sup>23</sup> The silence of the Vatican and other Christian communities in the face of the horrors of the Holocaust is a moral failing for which they continue to bear reproach. A Jewish commentary on the Vatican document notes that “the personal denunciations of some cardinals or lay leadership didn’t become the official position of the Catholic Church in Germany.”<sup>24</sup> This example of a wrongly kept silence is not meant to condemn the Catholic church as uniquely culpable in the tragedy of the Holocaust because of its silence, but is discussed only because the hierarchical structure of the church provides an opportunity for investigating official positions. The silence of the church in the face of the Holocaust mirrors the white moderate churches’ silences in the face of American racism, but the silence was a more universal practice across the Christian churches of Germany during World War II.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as a minister of the Confessing Church in Germany, represents an individual who stood against the institutional church’s silence in the face of the Nazi regime. He notes in a confession on behalf of the church that “she was silent when she should have cried out because the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to

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<sup>21</sup> MacCulloch, *Silence*, 211.

<sup>22</sup> Dulles and Catholic Church, *The Holocaust, Never to Be Forgotten*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

heaven. She has failed to speak the right word in the right way and at the right time.”<sup>25</sup> In this confession, Bonhoeffer brings condemnation against the German church for its misuse of speech to the detriment of the persecuted. Bonhoeffer’s critique not only condemns the ecclesial structures that failed to make official pronouncements, but also the individual Christians of which the churches were constituted. He argues that “it is the entirely personal sin of the individual which is recognized here as a source of pollution for the community.” Thus, in the first person, he confesses, “I am guilty of cowardly silence at a time when I ought to have spoken.”<sup>26</sup> This individual dimension of communal sin is an important addition to the discussion of the church’s failure in silence because it personalizes the guilt of these ecclesial structures to those individuals who make up the structures. Rather than placing the entire moral failing in power structures outside of the individual Christian, Bonhoeffer condemns each Christian, along with himself, for our own complicity in the silence of the church in the face of evils that ought be condemned. By broadening the guilt of wrongly kept silences, Bonhoeffer turns each Christian’s ethical reflection inward to examine the ways in which he or she ought confess his or her own failings with respect to silence.

Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology hopefully provides a way out of the wrongly kept silences of the church by constituting confession as an essential part of the life of the church. He defines the church as “that community of human beings which has been led by the grace of Christ to the recognition of guilt towards Christ... If it were otherwise,

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<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

she would no longer be the church.”<sup>27</sup> For Bonhoeffer, confession is an essential part of the church, and is one of its defining characteristics. In the corporate confession of the church, an individual is able to recognize both their own personal guilt and the corporate guilt of the community. This emphasis on confession is important for Bonhoeffer because from the confession of guilt “there arises the possibility of forgiveness.”<sup>28</sup> For Bonhoeffer, confession is necessary so that forgiveness enters the life of the individual in the church. He expounds this connection by arguing that “the Church, and the individual man within the Church, must share in the shame of the cross, the public death of the sinner.”<sup>29</sup> The public confession of guilt within the church and by the church allows an individual to participate in the crucifixion of sin through the crucifixion of Jesus. Through confession, one begins to bring about forgiveness and wholeness. This participatory understanding of confession explains the close connection between confession and forgiveness, making confession an essential part of the church’s mission to emulate Jesus. Confession is a means by which the church obtains cruciformity, forming itself into the image of Christ through crucifixion of its sins.

This connection between confession and forgiveness shows why the church must confess and repent of both its silencings and its wrongly kept silences. Until the church begins to participate in the crucifixion of sin at the cross by the public confession of wrongly kept silences, it will be unable to enter into a more thorough ethic of communication. Muers argues that “calling attention to past and continuing acts of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 52.

violent silencing, finding ways of hearing the silenced, and repenting of the silencing performed by one's own speech need not be a secondary or subsequent concern of theology."<sup>30</sup> She suggests that part of the task of the theologian is to acknowledge the complicity of the church in the silencing of others and in wrongly keeping silences that perpetuate injustice. Thus, an important part of the theological task today is to recognize silencings and wrongly kept silences in the modern church and to confess these sinful acts before attempting to come to fuller theological language. This chapter has been an exercise in such confession, recognizing failures of the church with respect to silence and speech. After this confession, I turn in the final chapter to the construction of a form of theological speech that properly integrates silence and speech, taking up the question of how ought the church and theologian speak and remain silent in order to respect the speech and silences of others.

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<sup>30</sup> Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 219.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Truthfulness of Silence: An Ethic of Communication

The author of Ecclesiastes notes, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”<sup>1</sup> Thus far, I have argued that silence is a powerful act, but one that the church has often failed to properly use both through wrongly keeping silence and through the silencing of others. In this final chapter, I investigate the proper way for the church to integrate the practice of silence into its life while guarding itself against its historical failings. The quote above from Ecclesiastes suggests that silence and speech must both be properly integrated into the life of the church if the church is to have a proper ethic of communication. Silence and speech must be practiced in the proper way, at the proper time. I argue that, rather than attempting to formulate a universal ethical system that provides a series of tests by which to decide when the church ought to speak, the church, in order to speak truthfully, must ground its ethics of communication in the community of the universal church as it is expressed in particular ecclesial communities in which many individuals both speak and keep silence. Using the work of Bonhoeffer, I argue that systems that attempt to formulate universally applicable norms only create an image of truth fit to a particular context rather than the living truth of God expressed in the communities of the church to which my contextual communicative ethic corresponds. This living truthfulness rooted in

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7b

God must be the standard for communicative practice in order for communication to be truly powerful.

First, I set forth two understandings of the relationship between silence and speech, arguing that both understandings too strongly emphasize one practice at the expense of the other, and therefore do not correspond with Bonhoeffer's conception of truth. Then, I contend that silences and speech must be mutually informative and cannot be separated in the practice of truth-telling. Finally, I attempt to establish an ethic of communication that corresponds to the living truth of God, properly including both speech and silence, built around fulfilling one's communicative roles, grounding this ethic in the practiced life of the church.

One form of understanding the relationship between speech and silence within Christian theology is that Christianity is a religion primarily about speech rather than silence. This conception of Christianity is memorably captured in E.M. Forster's phrase, "poor little talkative Christianity."<sup>2</sup> This way of practicing Christian communication is built around the offering of speech with respect to all issues, inserting speech into the communicative environment without recognizing the importance of silence or listening. One can see such a position in many contemporary churches concerned with speaking their moral opinions on matters without listening to the complex experiences of those whom they denounce. This may be an example of an overly politicized form of Christianity that leads to forms of communicative violence and silencing. Muers notes that Christianity's emphasis on speech can be "interpreted as an attempt to seize and

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<sup>2</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 141.

maintain control.”<sup>3</sup> By seizing control of the communicative environment, some Christians perpetuate violence against those unable to speak, neglecting the important role of voluntarily chosen silence in Christian theology.

Additionally, this conception of Christianity results in an impoverishment of speech through a neglect of the two sides of communication that involve both the speaker and the quiet listener. Without silence, speech cannot reach its greatest capacities. Williams argues that language uses silence “as part of its continuing search for an adequate response to what it is ‘given’, the search for ways of ‘making sense.’”<sup>4</sup> Silence is an important part of the work of language, which is not reducible to speech. Through considering the way that silence can have meaning, Williams argues that the spaces between words are as important for the conveyance of meaning as the words themselves. An overly “talkative” conception of Christianity reduces the work of the church’s communicative role to that of a constant speaker. Such speaking is not aimed at producing communication with later listening to other speakers, but rather setting out a political program. Speech fails to play a role in communication because it does not aim at constructive conversation that produces change in the interlocutors.

This privileging of speech at the expense of silence and communication ignores silence’s power of communication. Williams argues that “the silence of bodily presence consciously entered upon” helps with “representing the unconditional.”<sup>5</sup> Through choosing to enter into silence with one’s entire body, one can convey a meaning that

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<sup>3</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 76.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 175–176.

transcends words. This transcendent meaning, towards which silence gestures, remains incommunicable to forms of Christianity that conceive of speech as the defining activity of the Christian. Silence can be a form of rehabilitation of this “talkative,” politicized Christianity by encouraging true communication, which requires both speaking and hearing.

A second understanding of Christianity is that of a religion of silence. This silence can be thought of both literally and metaphorically. Christianity built around literal silence may be difficult to find in the modern world, excluding some monastic orders. Even those monastic orders do not conceive of silence as the calling of the entire church, but rather as the particular vocation of some individuals within the church. These silences are often ordered towards communication, for example the communication with God experienced in forms of silent contemplative prayer. The metaphorical conception of silence, which is not ordered towards meaningful communication, is more prevalent in the history of the church and in modern Christian thought. If the option above of Christianity based primarily upon noncommunicative speech is overly political, this form of Christianity is overly de-politicized. Christians are called to remain silent about social affairs, reducing Christianity to a private experience without political implications. Christianity’s political implications are silenced by reifying social concerns as unimportant to the life of the Christian, working to spiritualize Christianity. This silencing of the political voice of Christianity is found within historical churches that remained silent in the face of oppression. These churches, for example the state church of Nazi Germany, understood Christianity as concerned only with spiritual affairs, rather than considering the political implications of the gospel proclamation. The metaphorical

silence of the church continues today within many American churches that do not speak against the oppression of the majority world generated through American patterns of consumption. This position is thus a modern one with which contemporary Christians must contend.

Conceiving of Christianity as a silent religion runs the risk of accepting silence without working against wrongful silencings and protecting forms of silence that become silences of resistance. Christianity has possessed political implications from its inception with Paul's proclamation of Jesus as "Lord." This proclamation stood against the lordship of Caesar, and early Christians were persecuted for refusing to offer political allegiance to the Roman Empire. Frederick Douglass, in a scathing critique of the American church, argues, "I believe that the grand reason why we have Slavery in this land at the present moment is that we are too religious as a nation, in other words, that we have substituted religion for humanity."<sup>6</sup> Douglass contends that the spiritualization of Christianity, what he terms "religion," endorses the status quo, in his case the moral atrocity of slavery in America. This spiritualization is one form of the de-politicization of Christianity because Christianity loses its political voice, instead becoming focused only upon spiritual matters. Christianity based only around spirituality but not concrete action remains silent in the face of evils, choosing thereby to endorse the contemporary status quo, which contains many instances of oppression and silencing. This conception of Christianity misunderstands the political nature of the Christian message resulting in incorrectly kept silences about injustice.

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<sup>6</sup> Douglass, "Too Much Religion, Too Little Humanity: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 9 May 1849," 180.

My critique of this metaphorically silent Christianity should not be understood as an argument against temporary silences in the church. Instead, such temporary silences may provide important space for the marginalized to speak. These temporary silences differ from the metaphorical silencing of the church's political voice because they aim towards the church ultimately speaking against forms of oppression. Thus, temporary literal silences can be an important way of allowing the church to understand the political issues upon which it ought comment.

In order to create a flourishing ethic of communication, silence and speech must inform one another in Christian practice. Gustavo Gutierrez argues that “silence, the time of quiet, is the first act and the necessary mediation for the time of speaking about the Lord or doing theo-logy, which is the second act.”<sup>7</sup> In this passage, Gutierrez means by silence primarily meditation before God, but his description of this time of meditation as the “time of quiet” opens up his meaning to encompass other forms of silence. For Gutierrez, one hears the voice of God in silence not only through practices of meditation, but also through listening to the speech of the poor. He concludes his commentary on Job by arguing that “only if we know how to be silent and involve ourselves in the suffering of the poor will we be able to speak out of their hope.”<sup>8</sup> Listening to the voice of the poor becomes one way to listen for God's voice, which can appear in the places that the privileged of the world least expect it in the same way that the Word of God appeared in a lowly stable. Without this first step of listening in contemplation both before God and before the other, one's communicative efforts are impoverished; speech overwhelms

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<sup>7</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

silence. Additionally, communication that does not foreground the voice of God being found in unexpected places does not correspond truthfully with God's care for the marginalized of the world. Instead, speaking without the first act of silence primarily reinforces unjust power structures that do not reflect the non-coercive power of God, who is the foundation for truth.

Focusing primarily upon silence without eventually coming to the place of speech also results in a less than ideal form of communication. If all individuals remain literally silent, then the work of theology cannot occur. Bonhoeffer argues that "silence and speech have the same inner correspondence and difference as do solitude and community. One does not exist without the other."<sup>9</sup> For Bonhoeffer, silence is primarily an individual act that informs one's communal speech. Without this solitary form of listening silence, Bonhoeffer does not think it possible to speak well within a community. This practice of literal silence is found within many monastic traditions that focus upon the silent individual life of the monk that informs the community life of the monastery. Periods of literal silence are vital for the communicative ethic of Bonhoeffer's ideal community set forth in *Life Together*. He continues, "right speech comes out of silence, and right silence comes out of speech."<sup>10</sup> This statement of the mutually informative character of speech and silence sees each as necessary to the existence of the other. To understand Christianity as constituted primarily by speech or primarily by silence is an incomplete understanding of the Christian faith, a faith that sets forth both silence and speech as

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<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

important pieces of the communicative process. For Bonhoeffer, the life of a speaking community is impossible apart from the times of literal silence that make it up.

Although Bonhoeffer is primarily concerned in *Life Together* with literal silence, I argue that the appropriate use of literal silence prevents the misuse of metaphorical silence. Literal silence is often communicative of political intentions; the metaphorically silent church misses this communicative dimension. By practicing literal silence, the metaphorically silent church becomes able to correctly hear the expressive silences and speech of the marginalized, leading this community into social engagement on behalf of the oppressed. The appropriate use of literal silence in the communicative efforts of the church informs its political and ethical practice by attending to the concerns of its marginalized members.

In integrating literal silence and speech within a complete communicative ethic, I argue that the creation of an abstract matrix by which Christians decide when to speak and when to remain silent fails because it does not correspond with the living truth of God, which is not reducible to a theoretical system. Bonhoeffer provides an entry into this critique of universal ethical systems through his consideration of the relationship between speaking and truth-telling. In his unfinished essay, “What is Meant by Telling the Truth?” he argues that “it is only the cynic who claims ‘to speak the truth’ at all times and in all places to all men in the same way.”<sup>11</sup> Such a conception of truth is not the actual living truth, but only “a lifeless image of the truth.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, “the truthful word is not in itself constant; it is as much alive as life itself” because of the way in which

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<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 328.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



truthfulness is grounded in particular relationships and cannot be abstracted to a universal law.<sup>13</sup> For Bonhoeffer, ethics of communication, along with ethics in general, must take into account the particular relationships and roles in which one exists. The attempt to abstract universal ethical principles fails to take into account the particularities of embodied human existence, which does not partake of a universal form among all people, but rather exists in particular iterations of human lives.

Such an argument for a contextual ethic does not lead Bonhoeffer into a form of relativism in which ethical decisions are primarily a matter of personal preference. To admit such an ethical understanding would be to privilege the strong and powerful who have the ability to impose their own ethical preferences upon the weak and unable to speak. Within the realm of communicative ethics, relativism could lead to further silencing of the oppressed to whom the powerful do not prefer to listen. Instead, Bonhoeffer grounds his ethic of communication in his conception of the “real” which exists in God. For Bonhoeffer, the Christian must remember that “God is not a general principle, but the living God who has set me in a living life and who demands service of me within this living life.”<sup>14</sup> Ethical reflection cannot be divorced from particular contexts because God, who entered history in the incarnation, is concerned with particular concrete situations. Other conceptions of God reduce God to a “metaphysical idol,” who does not impact the concrete situations in which individual Christians live.<sup>15</sup> One’s communicative practices are therefore contextual to the particular “living life” that

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

one inhabits, but this “living life” provides limits upon one’s speech, which cannot be understood in only relativist terms. The Truth of God is not contained within an abstract moral system, but finds concrete expression in the community of God’s church, understood as the Body of Christ, who is the ultimate truth.

Christians must therefore not develop a matrix through which to consider a particular situation, then determining whether they should speak or remain silent in this situation. Muers notes that “the theologian who claims the right to tell everyone else how to behave, without hearing her own words in relation to her own situation, is already complicit in a ‘*logos* that does not speak and hardly listens.’”<sup>16</sup>. The failure of such a normative matrix of truth-telling is that it does not take into account the concrete particularities of the life of the various parts of the church, instead attempting to abstract to a universal system. This universal system presumes that one can properly evaluate a situation apart from being embedded within it, a proposition that is far from clear. Rather, all attempts to communicate truthfully involve power dynamics between individuals in historically situated situations. Truth-telling involves not faithfulness to a “lifeless image of truth” producible by universal categorical imperatives, but consideration of the particular context in which one speaks and keeps silent. If this truth-telling is to find its root in the living truth of God, then one must consider one’s exercises of power that are ethically challenged by the non-coercive power of God.

Bonhoeffer argues that it is important that our speech and silence correspond to the living God. He argues, “The assigned purpose of our words, in unity with the word of God, is to express the real, as it exists in God; and the assigned purpose of our silence is

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<sup>16</sup> Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 217.

to signify the limit which is imposed upon our words by the real as it exists in God.”<sup>17</sup>

Rather than grounding communicative choices in abstract principles that apply equally to every situation, Bonhoeffer connects our faithful speech and silence to God, who is concerned with concrete particularities rather than universal precepts. This emphasis upon particularities does not deny the existence of universal truth. Rather, such living truth as it applies to ethical behavior is accessible through the concrete particularities of life and not through the creation of universally applicable moral norms because the real as it exists in God corresponds with one’s particular communal context. Such communicative choices apply equally to speech and silence, which together constitute the communicative field. The grounding of one’s communication in a particular time and place is necessary because of God’s presence in concrete moments and humanity’s inability to escape its particular contexts and settings.

From this grounding in particular relational contexts, Bonhoeffer draws three standards upon which one can evaluate truth-telling. Asking, “how can I speak the truth?”

Bonhoeffer answers with three points:

1. By perceiving who causes me to speak and what entitles me to speak.
2. By perceiving the place at which I stand.
3. By relating to this context the object about which I am making some assertion.<sup>18</sup>

These propositions, though universal ones, direct the ethical enquirer to consider his or her concrete situation before choosing either to speak or to remain silent. I contend that the church’s previous failures in speaking and wrongly kept silences result from

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<sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 332.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

misunderstanding the historical context in which the church was speaking or keeping silent. All utterances occur within a particular place and time and between particular individuals that must be considered when determining whether to speak or to remain silent. I argue that the primary consideration in an ethic of communication is Bonhoeffer's first statement that considers one's justification for speaking. The "what" within the statement must also include a "who." This "who" must include at least three individuals—the speaker, the hearer, and those about whom one speaks. To neglect any of these three individuals or groups, for speech and hearing have corporate as well as individual dimensions, would be to not fully grasp one's particular context, thereby failing to conform one's speech to reality as it exists in God.

Bonhoeffer argues, "The right to speak always lies within the confines of the particular office which I discharge."<sup>19</sup> This consideration of offices and roles grounds communicative efforts in the relationship of individuals. Thus, I argue that one's ethic of communication, including both silence and speech, is irrevocably connected to the sort of community in which one lives. This community gives meaning to one's speech and silences, the exercise of which cannot be divorced from the roles that one occupies. Communities involve particular power dynamics in the relationships between individuals, and it is therefore essential to consider the way in which the offices and power dynamics of our communities reflect power as it is exercised by God. One's office, which gives meaning to one's speech and silences, must be exercised justly in order for it to correspond to the living truth of God. Therefore, I now conclude by investigating the way

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 334.

in which communal practice informs our ethic of communication, giving rise to silence and speech that does not result in silencing but flourishing communication.

The community of the church is the one in which communicative practice corresponding to living truth can occur. The church as the Body of Christ is called to conform itself to the image of Christ, who is Truth. Through the communal communicative practice of the church, it is possible for the living truth of God to gain fuller realization in the concrete contexts of the world. It is not at all certain that oppressors will willingly choose to abandon their control of the communicative space, silencing others so that their own speech may be predominant. This communicative violence is not truthful communication because it does not reflect God's care for the marginalized and oppressed. Thus, it is important for the church to enact an alternative community that actively avoids communicative violence. Muers, in constructing her own ethics of communication calls for "the kind of non-violence that interrupts the cycle of violence and simultaneously enacts an alternative possibility."<sup>20</sup> Even though the community of listeners of the church is surrounded by a world of violence in which individuals are daily silenced, it is important that this community enact a nonviolent alternative in which individuals fall quiet to hear each other, resulting in a flourishing communicative environment in which all are able to have a voice that witnesses to injustice and is heard in silence by others. Such a community of listening enacts an alternative communicative possibility in the world corresponding to the creative living truth of God.

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<sup>20</sup> Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 215.

The Christian grounds this responsible listening community in the universal church. This understanding of Christians across both space and time allows for a radically inclusive community of communication. The universal church includes Christians who are both powerful and oppressed, speaking and silenced, complicit in injustice and fighting against it. The universal church is therefore the place in which the formation of a new communicative alternative is possible. If one conceives of Christians each as members of “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” then one sees the way in which this calling allows Christians to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into marvelous light.”<sup>21</sup> Because each member of the church is called equally into this newly constituted people of God, their individual voice represents an important part of the Christian tradition that ought not be ignored. By recognizing the way in which the universal church gives voice to the poor and downtrodden of history, one creates a foundation for understanding the church as the place of redeemed communication. The communion of saints is the ideal listening community, containing the voices of the oppressed and the oppressor, making space for a reconciliation of communication between these two groups who are already part of a single community.

Yet, such an ethereal concept threatens to reify the church’s communicative practice to an abstract concept of listening that does not consider the present ways in which the truth of God is realized through particular ecclesial communities. One’s ethic of communication must be grounded within the concrete life of the church in the world, as it actually exists. Our ethic of communication built upon the ideal of the universal church must find particular expression within the particular ecclesial communities that

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<sup>21</sup> 1 Peter 2:8-9

we inhabit. For Bonhoeffer, “the exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from a Christian community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Particular church communities must work to include the poor and marginalized that the universal church already contains. Through listening to these brothers and sisters, Christians can begin to learn the appropriate way to speak and keep silence among the weak and insignificant. Ecclesial communities that display this sort of diversity truthfully correspond to the Body of Christ, the truth of God, which finds expression through its constitution by all Christians. Without the presence of poor and marginalized Christians, individual churches do not truthfully reflect the relationship of a diversity of believers to God through the universal church. Thus, an important component of the Christian training in an ethics of communication comes from the Christian’s participation in diverse ecclesial communities that makes space for the speech of the poor and marginalized. Through actively working to form communities that include a diversity of voices, Christians are able to learn to appropriately speak and remain silent from the example of the marginalized who call attention to injustices that ought be spoken against.

Particular ecclesial communities are important because “God has put this Word [of Jesus Christ] into the mouth of men in order that it may be communicated to other men.”<sup>23</sup> Particular Christian communities that are engaged in living their lives together provide the space into which the Word of God is spoken. This Word of God must be properly communicated and is based not only around speech, but also appropriate silences. In order to understand the proper way in which these silences inform the

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<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 38.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

Christian's ethic of communication, it is important to be involved in a particular community in which the Word of God is spoken and heard. Through this regular practice, Christians can begin to become responsible speakers and listeners themselves. In this way, Christian communities can begin to partake of God's Trinitarian existence in which each member of the Trinity continually speaks and falls silent before the speech of the others. In the same way, particular Christian communities can learn when to properly remain silent before the other and when to speak up against injustice.

In this way, Christians can create small alternative communities that enact a new method of communication that properly integrates speech and silence before the other. These alternative communicative communities attempt to establish a form of communication that corresponds with the living truth of God rather than contenting themselves with the lifeless image of truth provided by abstract systems. Instead, communicative reconciliation and change is effected only within concrete communities that seriously evaluate their own context before engaging in an ethic of communication.

Such communities may not on their own enact change within the violent communicative environment. Yet, through trusting in God's power to work through God's church, the Christian community can trust in God's guidance to create communities of responsible speakers that appropriately speak and appropriately remain silent. Despite the church's wrongly kept silences of the past, the church remains the community through which God creates a redeemed ethic of communication. Stanley Hauerwas famously contends, "The church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic."<sup>24</sup> I argue that the church does not have a communicative ethic; the church is

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<sup>24</sup> Hauerwas, "The Servant Community: Christian Social Ethics," 374.



a communicative ethic. The church, as the Body of Christ is God's living Word in the world. Through sacramental participation in the life of the One who is the truth, the church becomes the means by which God's living truth is realized on earth. Thus, the call to the church to create a communicative ethic that corresponds to this living truth is a call for the church to live in greater fidelity to itself as God's truth in the world. The church is God's solution to forms of communicative violence that abuse the power of silencing of others through creating communities where silence is rehabilitated into its proper role of listening and communication rather than wielded as a weapon to deprive others of agency.

The concrete practices of Christian communities form the basis of such a communicative ethic. For example, in baptism, the Christian is inducted into the body of Christ as a member equal to all other members. Through their shared baptism, oppressors become the brothers and sisters of the oppressed. This new familial relationship necessitates a new form of listening to the other. In order for the church to speak and keep silence truthfully, it must listen to the voices and often misinterpreted silences of the oppressed, making sure that its own speech does not overwhelm the speech of these vulnerable individuals. In order to prevent this overwhelming, the church must occasionally fall silent, but through this silence it learns how it ought to speak about injustice.

In order for the church to truly be the church, Christians must reject forms of speech and silence that neglect the possibility of communication. Instead, individual ecclesial communities must become places of true communication that do not prioritize either speech or silence to the detriment of the other part of the communicative

environment. By doing so, the church testifies to God's future eschatological redemption that overcomes communicative violence, creating a new world in which the tragedies of noncommunicative speech and noncommunicative silence do not exist. The church is called to be a means by which heaven begins to be realized presently on earth, emulating the non-coercive power of God that hears the communication of every person's silence and speech. Thus, the church must prioritize the process of interpreting other's silences and speech to prevent the silencing of others, instead creating new communities built around the possibility of communication and connection of individuals.

Through participation in concrete, diverse ecclesial communities, Christians are able to come to a more responsible ethic of communication, integrating silence and speech properly before the reality that is "in God." Through the creation of responsible listening communities that fight unhealthy power dynamics that result in the neglect of all voices, God works to overcome the silencing of others, thereby rehabilitating silence into its properly powerful role in the Christian life.

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