

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST IN THE PSALMS OF LAMENT:  
SHARED ATTENTION AND BONHOEFFER'S CHRISTOLOGICAL  
HERMENEUTIC

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**Abstract:** Recent scholarly advocacy emphasizes the importance of biblical lament in the life of the individual and the congregation, pointing to the comfort, assurance, and transformation that can be found in the psalms of lament. This article discusses how Christ may be encountered in these psalms and how such an encounter impacts corporate worship. I adopt Adam Green and Keith Quan's account of shared attention to establish a philosophical framework for encountering the divine in Scripture. Utilizing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalter, I then argue that the psalms of lament "mediate" an experience with Christ himself by allowing us to share attention with him. This "natural progression" towards genuine shared attention with Christ corresponds to the believer's maturation into more intimate acquaintance knowledge of God. The article concludes by considering implications for reading, praying, and preaching psalms of lament in corporate worship.

**Keywords:** psalms of lament, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, worship, shared attention

1. *Introduction*

In the fall of 2024, I led a five-week study, "Praying the Psalms of Lament," as a part of an educator-led offering facilitated by the chapel ministry leadership at Grove City College. I spent a significant portion of our introductory meeting asking the fifteen students before me to share why they chose this particular "Fiver," given its especially cheery, uplifting subject matter. Here is some of what I heard: "I want to learn more about lament. This isn't

something I hear in church. David's complaints feel kind of dramatic. I'm not sure how to pray stuff like this."

Humanity faces the universal desire to be met by God in our suffering, asking where God is to be found when our stories are blurred with tears. One of the dominant suggestions of our day, rippling through scholarly, pastoral, and devotional literature, is an argument for the importance of biblical lament in the life of the individual and the congregation.<sup>1</sup> Particularly in the psalms of lament, we have been given words of comfort, assurances of God's immutable goodness, and models for transformation.

But how do we encounter *Christ* in the psalms of lament? And how might such an encounter impact our corporate worship? Answering these questions requires two accounts. First, it requires a framework for encountering the divine in Scripture. Second, it requires a Christological orientation to both reading and engaging the psalms of lament.

This article utilizes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalter to argue that the psalms of lament "mediate" an experience with Christ himself, allowing us to share attention with him in corporate worship.<sup>2</sup> In the first section of this article, I will establish a philosophical framework for encountering the divine in Scripture using Adam Green and Keith Quan's taxonomy of shared attention. In the second section, I will articulate Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms, leaning on the recent scholarship of Brad Pribbenow and Tim Judson.<sup>3</sup> In the third section, I will connect Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic to the concept of shared attention, demonstrating how his perspective on the lament psalms corresponds to Green and Quan's taxonomy of "as if" versus "genuine" shared attention, reflects a "natural progression" towards more intimate acquaintance knowledge of God, and applies to the communal Christian life, evidenced most clearly in corporate worship. I will conclude by applying these insights to

1. Brueggemann has been a leading advocate for reclaiming biblical lament for several decades and his work offers a helpful orientation to the topic. For a recent compilation covering the content and theology of lament psalms, their absence in contemporary Christianity, and their ongoing value for the church (see *Our Hearts Wait*, esp. chs. 7–10).

2. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 419.

3. Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*; Judson, *Awake in Gethsemane*.

the invitation to encounter Christ in worship through reading, praying, and preaching the psalms of lament.

*Encountering the Divine in Scripture*

I begin with an exploration of how the inspired text of Scripture might mediate the presence of the divine, drawing primarily from Green and Quan's account of shared attention and Scripture. However, this topic builds on the broad and uncontroversial intuition articulated throughout the Christian tradition that "in the reading and proclamation of Scripture, believers do not merely encounter words about God, but in some way encounter God Himself."<sup>4</sup> In fact, in relaying a philosophical framework for such a phenomenon, this article assumes that God speaks through and may be meaningfully encountered in his word. The topic of shared attention joins a larger, growing body of interdisciplinary literature, considering how humans can grow in non-propositional or "acquaintance" knowledge of God. For example, Eleonore Stump offers a holistic account of acquaintance knowledge, applying the possibility of joint attention and second-personal engagement with God to biblical narratives in her work on the problem of suffering.<sup>5</sup> Acquaintance knowledge of God has continued to gain traction not only as a topic within philosophy of religion but also as a live question for the practices of Christian worship, enjoying interest from scholars in liturgical studies and worship studies.<sup>6</sup> Green and Quan acknowledge that their taxonomy of shared attention

4. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 417.

5. Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*.

6. E.g., Balfour extends both Stump's project on narrative and suffering and Green and Quan's model of shared attention to argue that acquaintance knowledge of God (including that gained through contexts of Christian worship) contributes to the development of a non-hubristic theodicy (see "Second-Personal Theodicy"). Campbell ("Joint Attention," 294–96) raises the plausibility of a "relational experiential" view of joint attention, a mode which immediately evokes possible applications for the congregation. See also Cockayne and Efird, "Common Worship," 319, who argue that joint attention applies not only to a human's shared attention with God but also the necessity of worshipping with other humans capable of "mutually guiding" and "shaping" our acquaintance knowledge of God.

functions as an overarching philosophical framework within which we might locate other models of how Scripture mediates the relationship between humanity and God.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, they demonstrate how various species within their taxonomy of shared attention are in harmony with Kevin Vanhoozer's "performance" model, Michael Rea's suggestion of a "mediated experience" through "q memories," and Nicholas Wolterstorff's "presentational discourse."<sup>8</sup>

### *Shared Attention*

"Shared attention," or as it is referred to in most philosophical dialogues, "joint attention," is the act of "attending" while another individual is "engaged in a parallel act of attending."<sup>9</sup> It may be either dyadic, where the individuals attend only to each other, or triadic, where an "independent object or event" is the focus of shared attention.<sup>10</sup> The reality of joint attention is most easily observed in the exchange between a baby and their parent. According to work in developmental psychology, the human capacity to consciously participate in joint attention precedes formal language capacities.<sup>11</sup> As the parent of two young toddlers, I participate (and

7. Because Green and Quan's view ("More than Inspired Propositions") is consonant with these (and other) models, I do not want the overarching conclusions of this paper, namely, how shared attention accounts for our meeting with Christ through the lament psalms in corporate worship, to depend on any specific contours of their taxonomy. Various tenets of Green and Quan's specific account may be rejected or clarified without altering the substance of this paper's conclusions.

8. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 428. Green and Quan reference Vanhoozer's "performance model" introduced in *Drama of Doctrine*, emphasizing the correspondence of this model to "as if" readings of Scripture. Similarly, Rea ("Narrative") proposes the possibility of q-memories via Scripture which offer a "sense" or "feel" of God, contributing to our acquaintance knowledge of the divine. Wolterstorff's model of "presentational discourse" is developed as one of many possible modes in chapter 3 of *Divine Discourse*.

9. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 419.

10. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 419.

11. Most children can engage in "full-blown episodes of joint attention" by eighteen months, though their capacity to jointly attend to objects with their parent begins developing much sooner (see Eilan, "Joint Attention," 1).

in fact rely upon) the possibility of shared attention daily. Let us consider a classic example: My daughter makes eye contact with me. She sees that I have returned her eye contact. At this stage, we are participating in dyadic shared attention. Then, she looks to a bright blue ball across the living room and looks back at me to confirm that I have also noticed the bright blue ball and am attending to it. We have now moved to triadic shared attention (over the bright blue ball). In this series of events, we are both aware of the other's cooperation and intentionality. And in my experience, the impact of sharing attention with a small human is immediate, usually involving a chorus of babbling and face-splitting grins.

Green and Quan extend this simple example in two important ways. First, they extend the "object" to include written texts, and therefore Scripture. Second, they extend the other party to include the divine. Let us consider the first extension. How might a written text "interface with the interactive ability" engaged in sharing attention?<sup>12</sup> Green and Quan offer the following example:

Alex wins a private cooking lesson with Rachael Ray. He is deaf, so Rachael communicates with him using written notes. At a certain point in the lesson, she hands him a note that reads, "Consider the golden brown crust of this zucchini bake," at which point he attends with Rachael to the crust. He looks back at Rachael who smiles and holds out a note between them that reads, "You done good."<sup>13</sup>

Here, the written text is responsible for constituting Alex's engagement with Rachael. It is also important to see that a written text is capable of instigating future shared experiences with a "proximal and available" party.<sup>14</sup> This allows for the plausibility of passages written millennia ago to function as "partly constitutive of the cooperative activity registered as a shared experience" or "solely instrumental to the experience occurring."<sup>15</sup> Green and Quan's account also argues for the plausibility of sharing attention with a divine party. This extension is bolstered by the clear as-

12. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 422.

13. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 422.

14. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 422.

15. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 422. The categories of constitutive and instrumental use will appear in Green and Quan's taxonomy.

sumption within the Christian tradition that it is possible for humans to have a personal relationship with God. Furthermore, as Stump argues, God in his omnipotence and omnipresence does not struggle to share attention with all of humanity at any given time.<sup>16</sup>

Green and Quan follow these extensions with a taxonomy of shared attention through Scripture. To proceed, I will focus on a distinction, a progression, and an application—a distinction between two primary modes of shared attention, a progression between modes that appears to mirror Christian maturation, and an application of this model to the use of Scripture in corporate worship. First, we turn to a major distinction in the taxonomy of shared attention between the “as if” mode and the “genuine” mode. Green and Quan demonstrate the nature of “as if” shared attention with an example of the paralytic healed in Mark 2:

One might simply read this as a putative record of what was said on a particular occasion . . . One could read the line imagining oneself as if one is in the room . . . One might also intentionally imagine oneself as one of the characters, perhaps as the paralytic having a dyadic experience with Jesus that is shaped by the surprising announcement that one’s sins have been forgiven. One could also read the words “Son, your sins are forgiven” as if they are being spoken into one’s present situation quite independently of the first century context of the story.<sup>17</sup>

It will not be hard to extrapolate how these various “active or passive, tacit or explicit, voluntary or involuntary” readings might apply to any given passage of Scripture.<sup>18</sup> However, this reading still does not seem to account for the persuasion that God is present within and currently speaking through Scripture. Green and Quan argue that “Scripture plays a role in facilitating shared attention with God by partly constituting the sharing of the attention . . . Just as Ray hands Alex a note saying he ‘done good’ that shapes how Alex experiences Ray’s kindly smile, so God might elect for the contents of Scripture to shape a dyadic experience of the divine.”<sup>19</sup>

16. Stump, “Omnipresence,” 44–45.

17. Green and Quan, “More than Inspired Propositions,” 423–24.

18. Green and Quan, “More than Inspired Propositions,” 424.

19. Green and Quan, “More than Inspired Propositions,” 426.

In genuine shared attention, Scripture “can be as intimately involved . . . as a point or a recognizable facial expression.”<sup>20</sup>

The notion that Scripture might partly constitute something “recognizable” of the divine leads to our discussion of progression. In general, the ability to genuinely share attention with God as mediated by his word appears to be something one practices and matures in throughout the Christian life.<sup>21</sup> Green and Quan suggest, “There is a natural progression between ‘as if’ engagement with the text, recognizing the instrumental qualities of Scripture, and entering into cooperative activity with the divine in which the God uses the text of the Scriptures to reveal Himself dyadically or triadically.”<sup>22</sup> Here, the notion of cooperation and intentionality are critical. Just as I might resist my daughter’s efforts to share attention with me due to distraction, disinterest, or an unfamiliarity with her cues or “voice,” Green and Quan suggest that we might cooperatively attend to *or* resist a “conscious prompting” that our “attention is being drawn to a particular verse.”<sup>23</sup>

Finally, we turn to the application of shared attention to the environment of corporate worship. These various modes of shared attention, including the examples provided thus far, seem to lend themselves towards the environment of individual study. We might imagine these “as if” readings and “genuine” mediated experiences of God’s presence occurring more naturally in an isolated, meditative, even “mystical” atmosphere. Indeed, one reason I have chosen to explore the relevance of Green and Quan’s account for corporate worship is that it is a less intuitive atmosphere

20. Green and Quan, “More than Inspired Propositions,” 426.

21. Green and Quan (“More than Inspired Propositions,” 427) point to a passage from Packer (*Beyond the Battle*, 23–24) in which the act of Bible study is described as a gradual progression from observation to dialogue and intimacy in God’s presence. A similar notion is behind Cuneo’s (“Ritual Knowledge”) treatment of “knowledge-how” to engage God. Cuneo describes how the ritual movements of the liturgy such as bowing, kneeling, and standing become, over time, knowledge of how one is to engage and commune with God (see (“Ritual Knowledge,” 383). This is yet another facet of how corporate worship communicates acquaintance knowledge of God to the worshipper.

22. Green and Quan, “More than Inspired Propositions,” 427.

23. Green and Quan, “More than Inspired Propositions,” 428.

(though I argue no less potent). Green and Quan do briefly gesture to the ways we might take God's presence at "face value" in corporate worship through the hearing of a sermon.<sup>24</sup> In such a case, hearing Scripture taught provides a context in which "God can present His Word through a fairly pedestrian experience as far as phenomenal fireworks are concerned."<sup>25</sup> I will return to our engagement with Scripture in corporate worship in this article's conclusion.

### *Christ and the Psalms of Lament*

Though we might consider a plethora of applications across Scripture, I want to focus on how shared attention might dispel our discomfort and unfamiliarity with the psalms of lament—how we might read these Old Testament narratives of complaint and suffering in connection to the person and work of Christ.<sup>26</sup> Many individuals have considered the relationship between Christ and the Psalter.<sup>27</sup> By choosing to relay Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms, I recognize that he is more the rule than

24. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 426.

25. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 429.

26. My choice of contextualization is important for two reasons. One, there are some narratives within contemporary Christianity that speak only of Christ's victory and defeat of death, precluding the necessity or relevance of Old Testament lament texts. Establishing evidence of the relationship between Christ and the lament psalms shatters this narrative. Two, this work reflects the relationship between Jesus's belief in the authority of the Old Testament and its fulfillment in his own life, death, and resurrection. Dockery and Yarnell (*Special Revelation*, 74) write, "His [Jesus'] Christological reading of Scripture meant that Jesus interpreted the Old Testament in light of himself"; they go on to state, "Jesus is the key to understanding the Old Testament." At the same time, "No one single image or pattern, no one motif or theme can adequately express this concept, yet what is emphasized throughout the New Testament is that numerous themes, images, and motifs of revelation and response are fulfilled in Jesus Christ" (75).

27. The list of perspectives spanning ecclesiastical history is expansive. Notable major perspectives include St. Augustine's work on the Psalms (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*) and the *Totus Christus* (the "Whole Christ") and Martin Luther's Christological interpretation (*Dictata super Psalterium*). Pribbenow (*Prayerbook of Christ*, 17) suggests that Luther's influence is particularly relevant to the development of Bonhoeffer's perspective.

the exception.<sup>28</sup> I also acknowledge that Bonhoeffer is not typically known as an exegete,<sup>29</sup> that his theological perspectives evolved throughout his life,<sup>30</sup> and that he can be a somewhat polarizing figure. So why choose Bonhoeffer to relay an account of Christ and the psalms of lament? There are several compelling reasons. First, Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic is uniquely strong in its emphasis on the necessity of Christ's presence in the Psalms. For him, it is not a mere possibility but a foundational pillar. Andreas Pangritz refers to Christology as Bonhoeffer's *cantus firmus*.<sup>31</sup> Second, the overall goal of this article is to articulate a philosophically coherent and theologically rich explanation for how the average congregant might encounter Christ through lament in corporate worship. Pangritz notes how Bonhoeffer is similarly motivated "to preserve the social concreteness of Christology in its relation to the Christian community."<sup>32</sup> As we will see, Bonhoeffer's explanation also has a clear and accessible intersection with Green

28. Though he is in good company, his perspective is nonetheless unique. Pribbenow (*Prayerbook of Christ*, 27) states, "Although Bonhoeffer shares a similar Christ-focused, church-edifying approach toward the Psalms held by many premodern exegetes, . . . there is, nonetheless, a hermeneutical decision that Bonhoeffer makes in his Christological interpretation of the Psalms that is not present in the tradition before him."

29. Banman (*Reading in the Presence of Christ*, 3) finds consistency in Bonhoeffer through "an enquiry into Bonhoeffer's *bibliology*"; he argues, "Christ's presence lies at the heart of Bonhoeffer's bibliology and informs his exegesis in identifiable ways" (11).

30. Pribbenow charts the development of Bonhoeffer's perspective on the Psalms, examining references to individual psalms in his later life and imprisonment. According to him, Bonhoeffer utilized the Psalms in personal letters, devotional writings, homiletical writings, and doctrinal writings. Pribbenow's chart of these uses reveals that Bonhoeffer drew most heavily from the categories of suffering, guilt, and enemies in his later life (*Prayerbook of Christ*, 156–57). Though Bonhoeffer "backs away from the Christological approach he proposed at Finkenwalde," Pribbenow suggests that the lack of evidence from Bonhoeffer explaining this shift leaves us to "only theorize the reasons for this change, which may involve the nature of Bonhoeffer's personal and political context in prison as well as the type or genre of writing that he was employing during this time" (170).

31. Pangritz, "Who Is Jesus Christ?" 134.

32. Pangritz, "Who Is Jesus Christ?" 142.

and Quan's taxonomy.<sup>33</sup> Finally, recent scholarship on Bonhoeffer and the psalms from Pribbenow and Bonhoeffer and lament from Judson invites further development and interdisciplinary application.<sup>34</sup>

*Bonhoeffer's Christological Hermeneutic*

Bonhoeffer's work on the Psalms can be found in three primary sources from his Finkenwalde era: the lecture "Christ in the Psalms" (1935); *Life Together* (written in 1938); and *Prayerbook of the Bible* (1940).<sup>35</sup> Pribbenow describes the "innovative move" in Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalter through two hermeneutical "pillars": (1) the practice of prayer; and (2) the person of the crucified Christ.<sup>36</sup> Alongside Pribbenow's two hermeneutical pillars, I point out that there are two "modes" of Christ's prayer that are important to distinguish: (1) Christ's prayer during his Incarnation; and (2) Christ's ongoing prayer at the right hand of the Father.<sup>37</sup>

33. Indeed, Banman's central claim on Bonhoeffer's bibliology will evoke the framework of shared attention even at this juncture; he writes, "For Bonhoeffer, Christ is really present wherever God's word is spoken. If God speaks in the word of Scripture, then Christ is fully there. We cannot come to terms with Bonhoeffer's exegesis until we have come to terms with this remarkable claim" (*Reading in the Presence of Christ*, 11).

34. Both Pribbenow (*Prayerbook of Christ*, 176) and Judson (*Awake in Gethsemane*, 92–93) highlight Bonhoeffer's personal example of reliance on the Psalter through times of persecution. We can easily see the connection between persecution, suffering, and lament. Scholars and pastors alike have identified a dearth of rhetoric and resources to engage congregants in their suffering. Judson argues, "Bonhoeffer's explicit treatment of the Psalter represents a relatively small proportion of his writing, but is crucial for making the step between the *theory* and *liturgical practice* (emphasis mine) of lament" (83). Again, I believe the primary liturgical applications of this paper are not wholly dependent on accepting Bonhoeffer's perspective and might be nuanced or exchanged in favor of other Christological approaches to the Psalms.

35. All quotations from Bonhoeffer's works are taken from the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works series published by Fortress (1996–2014) (see *Life Together*).

36. Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*, 93.

37. Pribbenow's summary of Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic effectively captures both pillars and modes, "What is unique in Bonhoeffer's approach is the way he situates Jesus Christ at the center of his interpretation, as one who prayed the Psalms in the incarnation as his own prayerbook, and who now continues to

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer articulates the formative nature of Christian community and its Christological foundation. Bonhoeffer writes, “Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.”<sup>38</sup> His discussion of the Psalms appears in the context of how this spiritual community, bound together through Jesus Christ’s vicarious action, should understand prayer, including what we should pray and how praying as a community fosters selflessness and solidarity.<sup>39</sup> Bonhoeffer offers this summary of his view: The “secret of the Psalter” is that “the human Jesus Christ . . . is praying in the Psalter through the mouth of his congregation. The Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word. He prayed the Psalter, and now it has become his prayer for all time.”<sup>40</sup> In this quotation, both pillars and both modes are easy to detect. In his lecture “Christ in the Psalms,” Bonhoeffer also gestures to how the psalms facilitate acquaintance knowledge of God: “How are you to understand what you have not yet prayed?”<sup>41</sup> Thus, according to Bonhoeffer, we are to engage in a kind of “prayer seeking understanding” of God.

*Prayerbook of the Bible* is birthed from observing the disciples’ petition to Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1).<sup>42</sup> Bonhoeffer sees this petition as an indication that the disciples have a desire and an inability to pray, one met in turn by Jesus’ instructions and intervention. He re-articulates the two pillars seen in *Life Together*: “we pray along with Christ’s prayer” and “we can pray only in Jesus Christ.”<sup>43</sup> Pribbenow describes how “the historical context of Jesus in his incarnation” prompted an inter-

pray these same prayers in eternal intercession before the throne of God the Father” (*Prayerbook of Christ*, xxi–ii).

38. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 5, 31.

39. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 55–57.

40. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 54–55.

41. Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education*, 387.

42. In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer aims to offer what the editor Kelly describes as a “theological interpretation of the Psalter” (144). Here, Bonhoeffer is clear (and brief) regarding how his interpretation applies to the various forms of Psalmody. Pribbenow (*Prayerbook of Christ*, 81) notes, “Bonhoeffer assumes the acceptability of traditional form-critical genre categorization of the Psalms, although he gives them his own thematic designations.”

43. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 155.

pretation of the psalms in which Jesus is the book's "subject and its main speaker, praying the prayers of the Psalms for himself and for his church in his incarnation and, now, in his eternal intercession."<sup>44</sup>

The psalms of lament are related to Bonhoeffer's thematic categories of suffering, guilt, and enemies. Bonhoeffer suggests that the lament psalms encompass every category of human suffering.<sup>45</sup> In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer asks, "How should we pray those prayers of unspeakable misery and suffering?" He cautions that we ought not "become completely caught up in something our heart does not know from its own experience." We do not "make our own complaints."<sup>46</sup> Instead, we relate these texts to the suffering of Christ. Judson clarifies, "Bonhoeffer is not arguing that those who experience suffering cannot seek comfort within the words of grief expressed in the Psalter," yet at the same time, "those who are not experiencing personal suffering must also pray the psalms of lament" just as "Christ prays the psalms of suffering vicariously for and with a world that has fallen into despair and godlessness."<sup>47</sup>

### *Encountering Christ in the Psalms of Lament*

I will now synthesize Bonhoeffer's understanding of the psalms of lament with the distinction, progression, and application we considered in relation to shared attention and Scripture.

#### *Distinction*

First, we revisit the distinction. Broadly speaking, the two "modes" of Christ's prayer in the psalms of lament correspond to the two major modes of shared attention suggested by Green and Quan. Utilizing Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the psalms of lament as the prayers of Christ gives us a strong Christological impulse in our "as if" readings. No longer are we left only to imagine the putative record of David's flight from his enemies. Our imagi-

44. Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*, 47.

45. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 169.

46. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 56.

47. Judson, *Awake in Gethsemane*, 87.

nation is not limited to the explicit evidence of Christ's quotations from the Psalter, such as his utterance of Ps 22:1 from the cross. There is an opportunity for passive and active, involuntary and voluntary readings. For example, one might read Ps 102:2, "Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress!" (ESV), imagining how Christ might have prayed these words in the Garden of Gethsemane or when faced with temptation. We might also imagine Christ walking alongside us in our sorrow as we meditate on the text. This freedom alone encourages a closer attention and transformation through the complaints against God and utterances of final hope and victory. Through the psalms of suffering, we "re-live the experience of Jesus' passion."<sup>48</sup> This idea of "reliving" and identifying with the suffering of Jesus hints at the power of sharing attention with Christ through an "as if" reading of lament passages. Though many Christians may find it difficult to connect to these Old Testament texts, the possibility of envisioning the incarnate Christ through "as if" readings will guide believers to a confidence in their ongoing relevance.<sup>49</sup>

Bonhoeffer's argument that the Psalms continue as the prayers of Christ even now offers a clear avenue for understanding how these Scriptures partly constitute our genuine shared attention with Jesus, allowing us to both anticipate and encounter the real presence of Christ through the Psalms.<sup>50</sup> Green and Quan seem to

48. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 152.

49. It is important to note that these Old Testament texts may serve to mediate shared attention with Christ despite the fact that David (or any other author) had neither Christ's nor our circumstances in mind when he penned them. As Green and Quan ("More than Inspired Propositions," 426) explain, citing the familiar usage of a Shakespearean sonnet gifted to a beloved, "It is possible for a text to constitute part of a shared experience without having been penned for that purpose." This point may also serve to diminish concerns that Bonhoeffer's interpretation eliminates the value of the original authorial context of the Psalms.

50. Subsequent discussion in this paper may feel heavily weighted towards connecting Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic with "as if" shared attention in corporate worship, even while Green and Quan's framework builds towards a focus on genuine shared attention (see "More than Inspired Propositions"). However, this discrepancy of emphasis is intentional. Christ's ability and desire to share attention with us is immutable, while our ability and desire to attend to his voice is fickle. Emphasizing "as if" reading reflects this reality and aids us in the natural progression towards genuine shared attention by giving us a concrete point of action.

suggest that when our cognitive state opens up, we are better positioned to participate in genuine shared attention. Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic is a powerful prescription for this very cognitive state, helping us to see that our prayer of lament joins Christ's own intercessions. As we read these biblical texts of suffering through a Christological lens, holding his ongoing prayer at the forefront of our minds, we accept the invitation to share attention with Christ himself.

### *Progression*

In many ways, the very concept of biblical lament is centered around progression—the progression from grief to praise and the simultaneous strengthening of one's relationship with God. Lament is something we must work at and “practice” as we acclimate to a new language. Bonhoeffer, too, acknowledges that the Psalter must be grown into. With Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic in mind, the psalms of lament may function to invite Christ into a natural progression towards genuine shared attention. Aided by “as if” readings, we might first grow in our comprehension of Christ's person in his human suffering and in his work of vicarious representative action. Over time, we grow more sensitive to the voice of Christ speaking on our behalf before the throne of God, drawing us into a more intimate relationship with himself and directly contributing to our desire to encounter God (not just words about him) in our suffering. According to the editor Geoffrey B. Kelly, Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the psalms of lament offers an answer, or rather, a relationship to those enduring persecution and suffering: “He who bore human affliction is God's enfleshed answer to the cry of abandonment.”<sup>51</sup>

### *Application*

In *Prayerbook of the Bible*, Bonhoeffer argues, “Whenever the psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure is lost to the Chris-

Furthermore, we dare not assume the specific content or constitutive function of Scripture in genuine shared attention between Christ and an individual. The very nature of acquaintance knowledge is such that it is personal to the parties sharing attention with one another.

51. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 151.

tian church. With its recovery will come unexpected power”<sup>52</sup> This language is echoed by Walter Brueggeman’s scholarship warning of the “costly loss of lament.”<sup>53</sup> The possibility of shared attention feels most obvious in the context of solitary study and meditation, and certainly the practice of biblical lament has value for the individual sufferer. However, Bonhoeffer’s continual emphasis on spiritual community and engaging the Scriptures with the Church points to the power of sharing attention with the divine *in* corporate worship. Every time we join Christ’s body and engage the words of God, we are invited to share attention with the divine and grow in our acquaintance knowledge of God. Worship is the place that invites us to envision, learn, and echo the prayer of Christ. More specifically, corporate worship is *the place* where God’s word is transmitted in community. When we engage the lament psalms in corporate worship, we intentionally assume a posture of readiness and an open cognitive state, accepting the invitation to share attention with Christ. This possibility contributes to the internal strengthening of the body of Christ, both in the way its individuals bear the suffering of fellow believers, but also in their witness to a suffering world. Judson explains, “The church laments not for itself, but for and with the world . . . Christ’s community bears the suffering world in his body, making its lament their own through its public liturgy.”<sup>54</sup>

### *Worshipping with the Psalms of Lament*

Finally, I want to consider how shared attention and Bonhoeffer’s Christological hermeneutic might enrich our corporate engagement with the psalms of lament via three brief examples of reading, praying, and preaching (or hearing a sermon). These examples all function as invitations to enter into “as if” shared attention and the cooperative state necessary for genuine shared attention.

### *Reading*

52. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 162.

53. Brueggeman, *Our Hearts Wait*.

54. Judson, *Awake in Gethsemane*, 72.

Reading lament passages together is a direct invitation to imagine Christ's prayer in his incarnational suffering and in his prayer on our behalf. We might consider a corporate reading of Pss 42–43, perhaps an antiphonally structured reading where the congregation responds three times in succession with the refrain "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (ESV).<sup>55</sup> As we imagine how Christ might have prayed the desperate questions of this refrain and how, in his intercession, he prays the promise of future praise on our behalf, we open ourselves up to the possibility that these texts will mediate our genuine shared attention with Christ himself.

### *Praying*

Despite extensive advocacy for praying Scripture (especially when one is unsure what to pray), there are many passages of Scripture that feel uncomfortable to pray, including the psalms of lament. The verbiage may feel foreign; the context may not be personally applicable. Don Saliers identifies, "Many worshipers do not know how to conjoin their real experiences in life with the poetic and rhetorical style of the psalms of lament."<sup>56</sup> When we see the Psalms as Christ's prayerbook and his lament as "for" and "with" the world, our prayers of lament become forms of "as if" shared attention. Furthermore, as Green and Quan state, "If one looks at one's life as if the divine is present, such a cognitive attitude may well prime one to encounter the actual presence of the divine."<sup>57</sup> Our prayer in worship is an act of attending to the revelation of God's word and a posture of willingness to genuinely share attention. Praying the psalms of lament as Christ's prayer is particularly valuable when we find ourselves surrounded by suffering with which we are not able to personally relate, a near-perpetual reality within corporate worship.

55. Saliers ("Psalms," 107) writes of Pss 42–43: "It thus mirrors the continuing dialogue between our life experience and the voice of Christ who continually prays this and all psalms of lament on our behalf."

56. Saliers, "Psalms," 105.

57. Green and Quan, "More than Inspired Propositions," 424.

*Preaching*

We have already seen in Green and Quan's account how the hearing of a sermon might foster shared attention with the divine. I want to consider this possibility in relation to the ongoing call for more sermons to preach the psalms of lament and how a congregation might be directly invited to participate in "as if" and genuine shared attention.<sup>58</sup> I am confident that these concepts are not too esoteric to have a deep impact on a congregation; this confidence was formed in part by a personal anecdote from my time at St. Ebbe's Church, Oxford. Several years ago, Vaughan Roberts, rector at St. Ebbe's, led a series of sermons entitled *Singing in the King's Choir*. As a city-center Anglican church, St. Ebbe's welcomes a robust, international congregation. Throughout this sermon series on the Psalms, lament was featured, not only on a single Sunday but also in three installments that mirrored Bonhoeffer's categories of suffering, guilt, and enemies. Congregants heard sermons on Psalms written "in despair," "in penitence," and "in distress." The framework of shared attention allows us to reevaluate the significance of the questions that were raised within this sermon series.

When Roberts preached on Ps 13 and invoked the question "How might Jesus sing this song?" he was explicitly inviting an "as-if" Christological interpretation. Roberts also hinted at the progression towards deepening faith through his repeated engagement with the text, stating that these words "first belong to David" and that they are "encapsulated and fulfilled in Jesus," and "as those who belong to Jesus, they become our songs too."<sup>59</sup> Through this sermon, congregants received an invitation to ponder the past and present modes of Christ's song and to share attention with Christ, mediated in this case by the prototypical psalm of despair. Roberts's sermon took seriously the possibility of congregants encountering Christ through preaching, and so should we.

58. Several excellent examples of sermons on lament (full text) may be found in Harper and Barker, eds., *Finding Lost Words*.

59. Roberts, "In Distress."

*Conclusion*

I conclude with a return to the introductory meeting of my “Fiver” this past fall. In many ways, the initial responses of my students were unsurprising. Unfamiliarity with ancient words and discomfort with vulnerable emotions has led the church to trend towards neglect of lament. And yet, individuals like those students continue to voluntarily approach the psalms of lament seeking an encounter—not mere “words about God” but a meeting with the God of all comfort himself.<sup>60</sup> This article has discussed how we might grow in acquaintance knowledge of Christ through the psalms of lament. Though it does contribute to the ongoing argument for including the “dissonant voice of lament” in worship, I have focused on how we might attune ourselves to Christ’s voice and suffering.<sup>61</sup>

Through Green and Quan’s account of shared attention in Scripture, we have encountered a way to take seriously the claim that there a real divine presence and voice are mediated by the biblical text. Aided by Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutic, we have encountered a way to imagine the person and work of Christ in his Incarnation and his ongoing intercession through “as if” readings of the psalms of lament. I suggest that we might meditate on the implications for our own lives, and, from a ministerial perspective, consider how these invitations might be extended to a congregation. Assuming that we are persuaded by the advocacy for reclaiming biblical lament in our worship, we can attend to these texts with intentionality and expectancy, eager to encounter the voice of Christ. Together, we share the promise that through the man of sorrows, we may truly know a “joy that seekest us (me) thru’ pain.”<sup>62</sup>

60. Green and Quan, “More than Inspired Propositions,” 417.

61. Judson, *Awake in Gethsemane*, 81.

62. See George Matheson’s (1842–1906) “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” (1882).

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